

# **Contemporary Actor Training in Australia**

## **Portfolio Thesis**

**Andrea Moor**

**Bachelor of Arts, Acting (NIDA)**

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This document records the three projects undertaken in order to fulfill the requirements of the degree of Doctorate of Creative Industries, QUT.

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# **STATEMENT OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP**

The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted to meet requirements for an award at this or any other higher education institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made.

Signed:



Date:

20.8.17.



**DOCTORATE OF CREATIVE INDUSTRIES**  
**THESIS**

Candidate: Andrea Moor  
Bachelor of Arts, Acting (NIDA)

**Contemporary Actor Training in Australia:**

A comparative survey of the efficacy of the acting methodologies implemented at four leading Australian actor-training institutions - National Institute of Dramatic Art, Queensland University of Technology, Victorian College of the Arts, and Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts.

Queensland University of Technology  
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## **KEYWORDS**

The following is a list of keywords that appear within the thesis or are associated with the thesis topic. These keywords have been listed for cataloguing purposes.

Keywords that apply to this study are: Actor Training, Australian Actor Training, Australian Drama School, Australian Theatre Industry, Australian Film Industry, Australian Television Industry.

## **ABSTRACT**

Each year, collectively, up to eighty young actors graduate from the four main acting training institutions in Australia: the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA), the Queensland Institute of Technology (QUT), The Victorian College of the Arts (VCA) and the Western Australia Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA). Whilst some will achieve great success in the field, others will make little if no headway into a career as an actor. Are these young actors being best prepared to make a living from their craft?

This qualitative, experiential study, grounded in practitioner expertise and underpinned by reflective practice, attempts to qualify the field of actor training in Australia by weighing up the efficacy of the methodologies taught at each school, against held beliefs and opinions of some of the most highly respected industry leaders. The comparative study takes the shape of an industry report in that I have sought feedback and opinions of the standards and traits of recent graduates from a selection of Australia's most highly respected casting directors, actor agents and theatre directors.

Through semi-structured interviews of the key teachers of each institution, the study aims to present a snapshot of what was taught at these institutions from 2000 to 2011. In order to determine the efficacy of this teaching in terms of best preparing actors for work at the top level of the Australian industry, I have interviewed six leading casting directors from Sydney and Melbourne, two leading actor's agents and ten leading theatre directors who collectively work for all the major companies in Australia.

I position myself as an industry practitioner, having graduated from NIDA as an actor in 1985 and working extensively as an actor in theatre, film, television and radio mostly in Sydney but more recently in Brisbane. I have also had extensive experience as an acting coach in film and television, as an acting teacher and in recent years as a theatre director.

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

NIDA – National Institute of Dramatic Art

QUT – Queensland University of Technology

VCA – Victorian College of the Arts

WAAPA – Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts

## **SCOPE OF THE STUDY**

Whilst every effort has been made to reflect the complexities of the teaching practices of each of the teachers interviewed, it is well beyond the scope of this paper to present a fully comprehensive investigation of practices that have been shaped through decades of experience. I have attempted to codify the aesthetic of each of the teachers and in so doing there may be philosophies and practices used by a particular teacher that are not reflected in this study. I would like to express my deep regard and respect for each of the teachers interviewed and acknowledge the passion and commitment that each of them has expressed over their often very lengthy career. There are also actor-training institutions that are not represented in this study. Again, it was important to define the scope of the study and so the four institutions examined were deemed the most appropriate. This does not in any way reflect my own regard for these other institutions, many of which are producing fine actors who are making a mark on the Australian screen and theatre industries.

In using the terms ‘industry’, ‘casting director’, and ‘theatre director’ I am not determining these bodies as ‘finite’ or ‘expert’ as the opinion of those interviewed may be biased by their particular interests. Those ‘industry’ leaders do however represent a diverse cross section of potential employers of actors. This study is addressing the ‘castability’ of actors in theatre, film and television and is accordingly not a study of the gamut of creative expression that a trained actor may find themselves engaged in on graduation.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## **DEFINITIONS**

Acting methodologies:

Those theories and practices used to teach the art and craft of acting including those associated with vocal and physical training for the actor.

Casting Director:

A casting director is responsible for liaising with the director and producer of a feature film, television project or television advertisement in casting the actors for the project. The casting director will contact the actors through their agent, conduct screen tests and negotiate fees. A casting director does not represent any one particular actor.

Actor Agent: An actor agent will actively search for work for actors that they represent. They will also put forward actors from briefs supplied to them from the casting directors and theatre companies. They will negotiate the fee and terms and conditions of each contract. Reputable agents will charge 10% of the actor's fee in commission. An actor will only pay the agent on receipt of monies for a job.

The Industry: This term refers to the industry in which actors will seek paid employment in film, television, radio, television or theatre.

Theatre Director: the theatre directors referred to in this paper are highly skilled, experienced theatre directors working for either State Theatre Companies of small to medium funded companies. They are not working within the commercial theatre sector nor do they direct the large-scale musicals. All the theatre directors interviewed are currently employed in the sector.

Entry Point: The entry point is the avenue through which the actor begins to explore the text or the work at hand. These include the intellectual, the analytical, the physical, spatial, emotional, sensorial, and via patterns or rhythms in the text. There maybe more entry points and

they are not mutually exclusive. An actor may begin with one and move to another or even use several simultaneously.



## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **Background & Context**

#### **1.1 Project Background**

My interest in pursuing this project was ignited as a result of many years teaching hundreds of Australian actors in major acting institutions, in private classes and as coach to actors in various film and television projects. My capacity to undertake this project is also supported by an ongoing and extensive career as an actor in theatre, film, television and radio, and most recently as a theatre director. I am a NIDA graduate and I also attended E15 Acting School in London and the Summer Intensive in Practical Aesthetics at The Atlantic Theater Company in New York.

In my work as an acting coach, director and teacher I have been exposed to the strengths and limitations of the training of many graduates from the major acting institutions. A recurring comment from young graduates embarking on a career is that they feel their training hasn't given them a strong enough technique to cope with the different kinds of work they audition for in the industry. A frequent observation from many film and television directors is that graduates of drama schools 'act' too much and that their work needs to be pulled back to create a simple realistic performance. As producer of the television series *Wild Side*, Michael Jenkins commented, "...the main things I look for in an actor in my kind of work are openness at the point of playing" (in Macaulay 2003:77). Nico Lathouris, dramaturg on *Wild Side*, added to this conversation with "...and in fact a lot of trained people can't do that" (ibid.). John Bell exemplifies the view held by many theatre directors that graduates do not have the skills demanded for complex difficult text: "... a lot of young actors lack: enough technique; enough discipline; enough knowledge of, and respect for, technique" (ibid.: 149).

Central to this study is the question: 'What training most effectively enables an actor to perform well for theatre, film and television?' This question has not previously been addressed through a survey such as this, which encompasses a wide range of industry responses – from Acting Teachers, casting directors, actor agents, theatre directors and acting graduates - into the practices of each of Australia's major acting institutions. Nor has the study been undertaken by a practitioner, such as myself, who has worked across all media not only as an actor but also as a performance coach in film and television, and as a theatre director, all at a high level. Within this report on industry perceptions of the relative effectiveness of acting training in Australia's four major acting training institutions, I position myself both as an insider and an outsider, a full explanation of which will be provided in the explanation of methodology in chapter two

The time is ripe for this industry-based report on the efficacy of the acting methodologies at Australia's four major actor-training institutions, National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA), Queensland Institute of Technology (QUT), Victorian College of the Arts (VCA) and Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA). The term 'efficacy' is adopted in relation to preparing actors for work within the established structures of employment in Australia. In this study that includes funded non-commercial theatre, and film and television projects that would be cast by one of Australia's leading casting directors.

For many years NIDA has been lauded as the premiere acting institute in the country. The school has graduated some of our biggest national and international stars including Mel Gibson, Judy Davis, Cate Blanchett and Sam Worthington. However, there is an anecdotal industry perception that in recent years there has been a shift away from regarding NIDA trained actors as the most sought-after when compared to WAAPA graduates. This is indicated by the number of top actor agents who will wait to see the WAAPA showcase at the end of each year before committing to representing a NIDA graduate. One agent commented "I will never commit to a NIDA graduate until I've seen what all the schools have on offer. Often I'll be more impressed with a WAAPA graduate" (A2 interview 9 May 2011). VCA had a

period of being on a par with NIDA, but anecdotally has been perceived to have slipped in favour since the departure of Director Lindy Davies. The QUT acting course has been regarded only in recent years as graduating sought after actors: “I really am not interested in VCA graduates much any more and would certainly put QUT above them. QUT has graduated some very interesting actors over the last few years” (ibid.).

## **1.2 Project Aims**

This project aims to report on how effectively, or otherwise, acting methodologies taught at each of the four acting institutions are meeting industry expectations. Are graduates from some institutions achieving better results than others? And are the most sought after actors, as determined by the industry leaders interviewed in this study, graduating from the most prestigious schools? Perceptions have always been hearsay and within these perceptions is professional and personal bias. Through interviewing key teaching personnel and aligning this data with interview responses from a well represented group of industry professionals - casting directors, agents, theatre directors and acting graduates - I aim to present an experiential perspective on the teaching practices at each institution and offer some food for thought regarding future course development.

This project will test the body of knowledge learned by student actors at each of these four institutions against expectations held by the selected group of industry professionals. The subjective nature of personal opinion, bias, taste and professional aesthetics comes into play to some extent within this group, however, the group represents experienced and insightful leaders in the field. The aim is also to pick out the particular methodologies, philosophies and instructional supports that are assisting the students particularly well for their future employment. The objective is not to criticize any one of these institutions but to investigate whether the practices at each institution are serving the graduate actor as best they could. As a teacher I am particularly interested in investigating my own teaching practices, in light of this study, to determine in what areas I could improve and expand my knowledge. Therefore this is also a document in self-

reflection as the findings will help shape my own practice well into the future.

### **1.3 Significance of the Project**

Industry leaders, graduates and the institutions alike have embraced this investigation, which is unlike any other, to date, in the field. Studies have been undertaken on the audition technique of VCA, NIDA and WAAPA, by Kath Leahy (1996), and of VCA, RE:ACTOR Acting Services and the Ensemble Studios, by Mark Seton (2004, 2007). Ross Prior investigated how teachers of acting institutions in Australia and the United Kingdom “characterise their teaching practice in actor training institutions” (2004). In his study he investigated five drama schools, two in the UK and three in Australia. His study examined the teaching practice and philosophies of the schools but did not test them against industry employment. As discussed further in the contextual review, there have been a number of recent studies in the area of actor training that have enriched this project, but there has been no comparative survey, such as this one, that examines actor training within the context of graduate preparedness as perceived by a representative industry group.

The fact that I am a practicing actor, director and teacher has been seen as a distinct advantage to those approached for interview, as my perspective is influenced by the practicalities and realities of working in the industry. It must be acknowledged that researcher bias may come into play in the selection of industry leaders I have approached for interview and indeed in the shaping of the interviews themselves. It should be acknowledged that my work as actor and director in theatre has been predominately grounded in text-based works within the State Theatre Company model. In film and television I have worked mostly in non-experimental platforms.

The study is particularly significant as most actor-training institutions are going through major structural and organizational changes. VCA has recently been absorbed into the University of Melbourne and has had to face significant funding cuts. The philosophy of the school has also moved

away from an actor-centered school to one that must also fulfill the needs of technical and design students. This has impinged on the actor's process that was introduced by Lindy Davies, which often required a non pre-determined design responsive to the rehearsal process. NIDA has been undergoing profound changes since the 2008 appointment of Lynne Williams as both Director and Chief Executive Officer (roles traditionally held by two people). The Head of Acting, Tony Knight resigned in July 2011, after being in the position for two decades, replaced by American Jeff Janisheski. NIDA, whose acting students graduate with a Bachelor of Dramatic Art (Acting), has also appointed a new Head of Voice and a new Head of Movement, amongst a range of new appointments since 2010. WAAPA has been faced with budget cuts and has just transitioned its course from an Advanced Diploma to a Bachelor of Arts (Acting) degree. QUT, which offers a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Acting) has also faced ongoing funding pressures as the umbrella Creative Industries Faculty, in which the acting course sits, has been extensively restructured.

The hope is that this investigation may offer some insight into how the institutions can best serve the industry or indeed change/affect the industry to ensure a higher employment rate amongst graduates. The results of this project will also have a significant effect on my own teaching and provide me with a very strong guide to syllabus and philosophy for future positions in any acting institution, or to act as a consultant on actor training.

#### **1.4 Contextual Review**

Within this project I have investigated the acting methodologies and the delivery of these methods in order to determine how the methodology taught is assisting the graduate actor and how it may indeed be hindering the graduate actor. As there is some crossover in techniques taught in each institution it is important to investigate the delivery of the methodology and to consider any overriding philosophy, ethical positionings, or key ideas related to actor training that may impact on the teaching in each institution. There have been anecdotal assertions made that teaching

practices have not always assisted the actors in terms of self esteem, and as this study is looking at the efficacy of training in the light of employment, it is important to determine if there have been issues that may impinge on actors' belief in themselves. In his paper *Longing to Belong: Trained actors' attempts to enter the profession*, Paul Moore surmises his discoveries from his PhD research (2004) and notes: "Unprepared to deal with an environment in which the skills they have learned to value are often ignored, actors displayed degrees of professional paralysis" (2004:6).

Moore surveyed trained actors attempting to enter the profession and he found that actors were unrealistically hopeful when the statistics painted a very different picture. He noted his own experience:

... I slipped into sadness, but stubbornly refused to abandon what remained of my expectations. Living in the bunker (a single room in a building of down and out men), washing dishes, I lost about all the confidence I had developed through training. Auditions of any kind induced in me a sense of terror.  
(2004:8)

His own experience led him to ask how training institutions might better equip graduates for the industry.

In another study, Kath Leahy (1996) examined audition techniques at NIDA, VCA, WAAPA and Nepean's Visual and Performing Arts Faculty. This project was not so much an investigation of the acting methodologies underpinning each school but of what were deemed to be the signifiers of talent from the auditionees. She determined that poise, confidence and a confident voice were strong characteristics of successful auditionees, thereby limiting success to those from higher social standing. Mark Seton also investigated the audition process in both his PhD thesis, *Forming (in) Vulnerable Bodies: Intercorporeal Experiences in Actor Training in Australia* (2004), and in his paper *Recognising and misrecognising the 'X' factor: the audition selection process in actor-training institutions revisited* (2007) and determined that the very nature of the audition process is fraught with an easily abused power play between auditioner and auditionee. His scope of investigation was limited to VCA, RE:ACTOR Acting Services, and The Ensemble Studios, Sydney. Bernadette Pryde's 2002 Master of Arts thesis

examined the actor training teaching methods at NIDA, QUT and VCA in an attempt to determine if there was a language of actor training to be found that was distinctly Australian. Whilst her paper examined the methodologies taught and the commonalities and differences in the language of teaching acting, there was no gauge of the efficacy of this teaching. Pryde concluded, “the training is not imitative but unique, serving the students with methodologies that the trainers have embodied, in languages that are authentic” (Pryde, 2002:192).

This study has examined the methodologies taught by tutors at each institution, how these methodologies are taught and under what circumstances the tutor originally learned them. Ross Prior, in his PhD thesis, *Characterizing Actor Trainers' Understanding of their Practice in Australian and English Drama Schools* (2005), asserts that much of what actor trainers teach is non pedagogical and there is a need to formalize the teaching into more concise formats that are more easily communicated to others. Prior also asserts that the tradition in acting training institutions “has tended to concentrate on acting methods and techniques rather than writing on the effectiveness of the delivery of learning” (2005:12). Prior extended his thesis in his book *Teaching Actors: Knowledge transfer in actor training* (Prior 2012) in which he detailed an argument for clearer pedagogy within the actor-training sector. Prior positions himself differently from me, he being a lecturer in Drama, whilst I am a practitioner, having made a living as an actor and a director since graduating from NIDA in 1985. Whilst I have also derived a proportion of my income from teaching and coaching actors, I have always worked within a professional context, coaching on Australian feature films or television series and teaching in established acting schools or in private practice. I believe this positioning puts me in a unique place to take a seat as a colleague, rather than an academic, of the teachers I have interviewed. I am also very familiar with the real world issues facing casting directors, agents and theatre directors and my empathy with the work they do, as a practicing artist, has put me in a unique position to open discussion. There was a palpable level of trust from all those interviewed as they were keen to share their perspectives in a collegial environment.

When interviewing Tony Knight and Kevin Jackson at NIDA, Andrew Lewis at WAAPA and Leonard Meenach at QUT they all claimed to be teaching a Stanislavsky based training. And yet the methodology and the end results of that methodology are vastly different. It is therefore important to clarify exactly what is meant by Stanislavskian training by examining the many and varied approaches of the man responsible for the most influential acting training methodology of the twentieth century, Constantine Stanislavsky.

So many acting gurus have reinterpreted his teachings over the last century that it is difficult to pinpoint exactly what can be attributed to him. Sharyn Carnicke (2009) outlines the development of Stanislavsky's approach from his early understanding of character preparation to his later focus on pursuit of action and active analysis. She makes clear that each interpretation of Stanislavsky's 'System' reflects a certain development and that each of his many disciples is limited in their understanding of the complexities of Stanislavsky's research as to when they learnt his System. The reverence with which Stanislavsky's name is held has created many limited understandings of the work (ibid.:67) and only now through a thorough investigation of the original Russian texts, of records of classes and conversations in Russian, and of a full understanding of the consequences of incorrect interpretation, translation and censorship can we begin to understand the complexities of Stanislavsky's philosophies and methodologies (ibid.:1).

I have been confused about exactly what we can claim to be 'Stanislavskian' training and what is a derivative of it. How has Stanislavsky been taught to teachers based in Australia and are we too reverent about claiming work as being Stanislavskian when in fact it may have been based on common sense? Nick Moseley (2005) points out that Stanislavsky was a product of his time and that he too would have adjusted his methodologies to be in line with modern actor training:

No-one could ever deny that he and his associates turned the craft of acting from a series of crude and self-aggrandising tricks into an elaborate and enlightened craft, which more than any other system of



the twentieth century helped to raise the status of the actor from that of mountebank to creative artist.  
(ibid.:5)

In order to create continuity in his own performance Stanislavsky developed a 'system' of approaching a character based on "attempts to manipulate the unconscious, whether through internal processes of thought and imagination or through physical action and sense memory" (ibid.:6), that he then went on to teach to the company of actors at the Moscow Art Theatre. In 1923 the Moscow Art Theatre toured to New York, thereby introducing Stanislavsky's system to American actors in classes taught by company members Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya. The American understanding of the system was largely based on Stanislavsky's earlier work with emphasis on emotional recall and sense memory. This work was made popular by acting guru Lee Strasberg, and became known as 'The Method'. A group of American actors and directors formed a company, *The Group Theatre*, inspired by their study with Boleslavsky and Ouspenskaya. Strasberg was a member of The Group Theatre from 1930 to 1940 and under his guidance the members studied his 'method', until Stella Adler met with Stanislavsky in 1934 and was informed by him that the approach they were interrogating was of less interest to him but "that the key to true emotion was to be found in a full understanding of the 'given circumstances' – the human problems – contained in the play itself" (Meisner 1987:9). Adler went on to develop her own work based on action whilst fellow company member, Sanford Meisner (ibid.), developed an approach to acting supporting his definition of acting as "the reality of doing" (ibid.:16). In broad terms Meisner encouraged actors to 'do' whilst Strasberg encouraged actors to 'be'.

Moseley (2005) is critical of Stanislavsky's system of creating character:

The end result is a theatre, which is a giant metaphor and amplifier for humanist delusions. I, the audience member, see a character who is emotionally and psychologically 'great'; behind the character I see an equally 'great' actor; behind the actor I see an equally 'great' human being, and behind that, my own potential 'greatness' as a member of the human race. It is a satisfying process, but it is not real.  
(ibid.:7)

I imagine that what audiences of the Moscow Art Theatre began to see in the actors trained under Stanislavsky's system was far more 'realistic' compared to the very heightened gesture-based performance style that preceded it. To a modern audience this work would likely appear grandiose and far removed from our understanding of reality. This over emphasis on pre-determined planning of one's performance denies the actor the ability to react in the moment to the other actor in the space and uncover spontaneous reaction. Again Moseley is critical of the pre-determined nature of the preparation used in this system:

Stanislavski evolved an acting methodology that firstly emphasized the construction of the character, through objectives, physical actions and external mannerisms; and secondly thrust the character as a ready-made whole into the theatre space, so that the audience could experience the character's (pre-ordained) journey but never question it or witness the actor being genuinely or unexpectedly affected by another actor.  
(2005:11)

Moseley poses that Stanislavsky was unable to drop the fourth wall and allow the audience in, seeing the two worlds of the play and of the theatre as entirely separate (ibid.:13). According to his understanding of Stanislavsky's system, Moseley believes it is time for us to move on:

It is time to leave Stanislavski behind, not without acknowledging his contribution to the evolution of the actor's art. It is time for our actors to stop searching for the elusive 'character' and understand that a character, far from being a comprehensible absolute, is something perceived in the moment through a series of both consciously and unconsciously generated signifiers. And it is time to train our actors to observe and respond to each other rather than following some internal pattern, night after night, often with deeply felt emotion, but without listening to anyone else on stage, and without allowing themselves to be affected by the unexpected. Emoting is not acting, reproducing is not acting. Reacting is acting.  
(2005:14)

American playwright, novelist, screenwriter and co-founder of the acting technique Practical Aesthetics, David Mamet (1997) questions the Stanislavskian notion of 'character', determining that in fact character is an illusion (ibid.:9). When the actor speaks the writer's words, with some sense of the intention of the scene, the character will be revealed to the audience. And yet it must also be said that Mamet responded, through the

development of the acting technique Practical Aesthetics, to Stanislavsky's later work on pursuit of action. Whilst Mamet is outspoken about his distrust of psychologically based work he is not adverse to personalization, by having an actor relate to the reality of playing a scene 'action'. His stance is predominately a response to the dominance of 'method' acting as taught by Lee Strasberg and his protégés.

Carnicke (2009) makes clear the ever-changing development of Stanislavsky's methodologies and confirms that his 'system', as most westerners understand it, really reflects his early work in developing preparation techniques for actors. For emotional recall and sense memory to be referred to as strictly Stanislavskian would be incorrect in the light of his later work, which, as Carnicke points out, is mostly focused on inner and outer actions, magic ifs, physical and spiritual connection and attention to voice and movement (ibid.:2). In fact in viewing a list of his later priorities, Stanislavsky's work resembles that of British director Declan Donnellan (2005). Donnellan emphasises the need to attend to a 'target' at all times in the scene and that 'target' may be a thought, another person, an object, a desire or objective, and it may change and shift within the scene, within each moment, requiring the actor to be ever attentive to working within each moment in a spontaneous manner. The desire to adhere to strict methods, such as those demanded by Strasberg, has the teacher and student keen to ascribe certain steps of learning to a particular acting training model, when in fact the work of Stanislavsky himself was an ever-developing system.

Such a multiplicity of interests makes the System non-dogmatic. Stanislavsky does not lie out a single right way to act. There is nothing absolute about his compendium of theory and techniques for the ephemeral art of acting that he so loved. He saw his System as offering advice to actors of different temperaments who wished to speak through different aesthetic styles. He called his System "universal" for these two reasons. Only three months before his death, he cautioned his directing students that, "One must give actors various paths". (Vinogradskaja 2000:498) Carnicke 2009:3

According to Carnicke both Mamet and Moseley are incorrect in assuming Stanislavsky was focused purely on the artificial construct of character, and in arguing against it they are "not arguing with Stanislavsky but with his

statue” (ibid.:4). Carnicke asserts that both the Russian and American concepts of Stanislavsky’s system exclude key elements of his exploration in actor training.

In the United States, conditioned by a Freudian-based, individually oriented ethos, actors privileged the psychological techniques of Stanislavsky’s system over those of the physical.....the Russian version of the System became identified almost exclusively with yet another aspect of Stanislavsky’s approach – the method of Physical Actions.  
(ibid.:7,8)

Stanislavsky is traditionally associated with realism, however he was particularly interested in the avant-garde and the Eastern Arts, yoga in particular. The mind-body-spirit continuum was of particular interest to him, as was physical and vocal preparedness. In his book *My Life in Art* (1924), he outlines the importance of the imagination in the creation of truth, preferring ‘imagined truth’ to ‘genuine truth’ (Stanislavsky in Carnicke: 35).

Carnicke points out that “many US proponents of the System simplify and codify Stanislavsky’s complex conception of emotion” (ibid.:127). She also asserts that Stanislavsky used many ‘lures’ (ibid.) to elicit emotional response including, but not limited to, sense memory. These may include use of the space, use of the actor’s physicality, script analysis and other inward and outward meditative ‘lures’. Whilst Strasberg made emotion the core of his investigation and believed a set of steps could guarantee ‘total emotion’ (ibid.:152), Stanislavsky did not adhere to the pursuit of a strict set of rules or guidelines as the method by which one could achieve truth in imaginary circumstances. Carnicke ascertains that Stanislavsky was not interested in actors sharing their personal lives in public and was wary that “personal associations could threaten the actor’s focus on the play and confuse acting with playing oneself” (ibid.:153). Stanislavsky cared for the mental hygiene of his actors, having witnessed the avoidable personal breakdowns of actors, resulting from the exploration of their own feelings.

Carnicke supports the idea that Stanislavsky developed an holistic approach to actor training, utilizing his earlier emphasis on emotion, incorporating yoga exercises in relaxation and concentration, and his later

emphasis on the pursuit of action (ibid.:185). His method of physical actions shares similarities with the approach of Australian director/teacher Lindy Davies in that they both expound an improvisatory approach to analysis to reveal the hidden actions. The limitations to Stanislavsky's system as understood and commented on by Mamet and Moseley were in fact the very elements that Stanislavsky moved away from in the work he was exploring prior to his death. Carnicke outlines this decisive shift in approach:

This early approach taught actors, like those of the representational school, to activate themselves through fantasy; Stanislavsky also expected his actors, unlike others, to transfer imagined action into stage reality. In this transfer, he risked their enervation. After twenty years of working with this early approach, he complained that after analysis through affective cognition, "The actor comes on stage with a stuffed head and an empty heart, and can act nothing" (SS IV 1991, pp325-6). In his last workshops, he therefore replaces "analysis of feelings" with "Active Analysis". He now demands that one begin to explore a play through improvisation, thus obviating the need to translate imagination into actuality....As Stanislavsky explains "the best way to analyse a play is to take action (destvovat) in the given circumstances" (SS IV 1991:332-333). This is the period when Stanislavsky restates his basic analytical question. "What does your character want in the given circumstances?" becomes "What does your character *do* in the given circumstances?". (ibid.:194,195)

Clearly the shift that Stanislavsky made in the development of his work is the nub of the ongoing controversy surrounding effective practice. Whilst in his early work, he was focused on intense character development, on the emotional life of the character and pre-determining a 'score' of actions in the scene, his later work encouraged the actor to discover in the rehearsal moment the possibilities of the scene without pre-determining what might be played. As will be revealed in this paper the three areas of his enquiry are reflected in the three main approaches found in this research. The intense personal investigation of the Eric Morris technique, as taught at QUT, reflects Stanislavsky's very early emotional recall and sense memory enquiries that was championed by Lee Strasberg. The middle period work focused on action and objective is reflected in the NIDA approach, and the later work, which allows greater discovery of the moment prior to making decisions about the scene is reflected in Lindy Davies philosophy as

practiced at VCA, even though Davies has rejected Stanislavsky. WAAPA embraces all three stages of Stanislavsky's methodology. This shift in approach represents the gamut of approaches that I will be discussing in this paper.

### **1.5 My previous Doctoral research projects**

This investigation builds on the previous projects and papers I have completed as part of the Doctorate of Creative Industries (DCI). This is the third project I have undertaken. The first two projects were practice-led with both practice and written outcomes. This last project is purely a research project.

In my first project I examined the efficacy of the acting technique Practical Aesthetics as taught to the cast of the Brisbane NIDA Young Actors Studio production of Caryl Churchill's *Mad Forest*. Devised by playwright and director David Mamet and actor William H Macy, this approach encourages the actor to predetermine the scene objective (what the character wants) and the scene action (how the actor gets the characters objective) but does not predetermine how each moment is played. The use of action words (transitive verbs) to describe what is played in the moment may be used in retrospect but each moment is revealed as a result of the actors working off each other in order to achieve their scene action. This technique encourages a detailed analysis of the play in order to determine the writer's intentions but also incorporates the discovery of the unknown as the moment is revealed in relationship to the other actors and other stimuli in the space. Personal connection to the scene is achieved by the implementation of an 'as if', used to make a personal connection with the 'doing' of the scene action and not to the given circumstances of the scene.

I have been teaching Practical Aesthetics as my core instructional process for the last eighteen years and was keen to determine if this focus on one approach had developed such a deep groove in my view of training that I was blind to other approaches. It was therefore important to me to determine the usefulness of this acting technique by examining my own

teaching and directing practice. I used reflective practice through the diarizing of each *Mad Forest* rehearsal and remained conscious of reflecting on my practice as I was engaged in the moment with the actors. As many of the actors had been trained in specific acting methodologies that elicited results that were contrary to my aims I was forced to address how best to steer these actors in a more useful direction.

A detailed critique of my direction was made by examiners Michael Gow (director and playwright) and Aubrey Mellor OAM (Director of NIDA at the time). A focus group, made up of practitioners, met after the second performance, and through an independent facilitator gave feedback on my direction. The feedback from both the focus group and the assessors revealed that the methodologies employed were effective in bringing the play to life through an acting style that was truthful and non-indulgent. There was some criticism of a lack of uniformity in the performances and it was perceived that my attention had been to firmly focus on outcome therefore denying detail on process. This project made me aware of the complexities of actor training and how the implementation of a single methodology cannot solve all the issues with all the actors nor can it address the different acting styles that were required for the different styles of writing within the play.

In my second project I was keen to challenge my need to reach an outcome by placing my focus clearly on the rehearsal process. The second project examined the outcomes of applying Umberto Eco's theory of 'the open work' (Eco, 1989) to the direction of Jon Fosse's *Beautiful*. In this fully produced production, with professional actors, I also examined my own transition from actor to director. My professional mentor was May-Brit Akerholt, dramaturge and the official English translator of all of Fosse's work, and my academic mentor was Dr David Fenton, currently Head of Performance Practices at NIDA. The notion of 'openness' was addressed in four areas: the openness of the text; the openness of the actors; the openness of the director and the openness of the audience. The process was designed to allow the work to be revealed by making as few decisions about outcome as possible. The openness of the work would allow the audience to have many

different interpretations of it. The production and the written reflection were assessed by Kate Cherry (current Artistic Director of Black Swan Theatre Company, Perth) and Dr Janet McDonald (current Head of Creative Arts at the University of Southern Queensland). I gathered feedback from a focus group and an audience evaluation, as well as written feedback from the cast. The observations from those engaged with the work was that I was not entirely successful in bringing the final production to life and, although wonderful moments in the production were acknowledged, there were times when the piece needed to be guided towards a clearer interpretation. What this process taught me was when to step in with clear decisions about interpretation and when to let the moment unfold with several possible meanings. With the acting style being the main area of investigation in both these projects, I believe I was successful in achieving an aesthetic in the performances that limited 'indicating', 'mugging' or 'showing off to the audience'. The performances were more nuanced and inclusive of the audience. Some actors achieved this quality better than others and indeed it was more challenging for some than for others.

In a previous DCI paper 'Building Vocabularies of Practice' (2006), I examined in brief a range of skills and practices that I deemed essential for the training of Australian actors for theatre, film and television. They were: professional attitude, autonomy, intellectual savvy, flexibility, personal training discipline, homework, research discipline, strong sense of self, ego alignment, sense of professional perspective, strong technique and the ability to reach out for professional support. This paper also highlighted a debate in the public arena today about the pros and cons of industry practitioner teachers versus career teachers, and raised the question of who is best able to deliver the most appropriate teaching to best prepare graduates for today's industry.

Within this current project I examine these areas in more detail with a particular focus on specific modes of training and techniques to deliver the most effective outcomes in each of these areas. As an outcome of this industry-based report on contemporary actor training in Australia, I am



interested in developing an over-arching philosophy of training that deals with *how* each training is delivered and not only *what* is delivered. The question of effective teaching practice is a complex one and brings up issues of ethics, teacher training and communications training. If it were possible to develop an overall philosophy of how a course is taught then perhaps both career teachers and practitioners could embark from the same core intent. Issues surrounding ethics in teaching is something I feel passionate about as actor training is a deeply personal and vulnerable business. The teacher has the ability to open the young actor's imagination, emotional life, sexual awareness, intellect, and personal awareness. In the process the same teacher also has the ability to crush the actor, leaving long lasting negative impressions that cross over into the actor's personal life, affecting self-esteem.

As the one thing a young actor needs is a healthy sense of self, it is imperative that the teacher is capable of nurturing the actor through these developments in the craft. Mark Seton investigated the vulnerabilities of actors in the audition process in his PhD thesis *Forming (in) Vulnerable Bodies* (2004) and interrogates succinctly in his paper *Post Dramatic Stress* (2006) this very question of the emotional life of the actor post training: "Acting schools are effective in shaping actors in 'taking on' a role. There is far less guidance, if any, about 'removing' a role or debriefing after a season of performances" (2006:1).

In studying current trends in contemporary best practice in my discipline, my paper, *A study of the methodology and challenges in directing young actors in various training environments* (2006), examined the difference between career teachers and industry practitioner teachers. This project extends this study into a more thorough investigation, in which acting staff from each of the major acting institutions has been interviewed. I have investigated their background as artists and teachers, looking for the key influences in their own training and the development of their teaching methodology. To further deepen the inquiry, leading theatre directors, casting directors and actor agents have been interviewed, and acting graduates surveyed.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **RESEARCH DESIGN**

#### **2.1 INTERPRETIVE PARADIGM**

This research is a qualitative experiential study grounded in practitioner expertise underpinned by reflective practice. In order to present findings that would be of real value to other educators, rather than just to other researchers, I determined that this study would need to contain a broad base of information that could only be gathered in a qualitative manner as opposed to a more rigid study of quantifiable data. As Kumar (2005) points out, the structured paradigm “that is rooted in the physical sciences is called the systematic, scientific or positivist approach. The opposite paradigm has come to be known as the qualitative, ethnographic, ecological or naturalistic approach” (ibid.:13). Staller (Staller in Salkind 2010) illuminates this idea:

Qualitative research, also known as qualitative inquiry, is an umbrella term used to cover a wide variety of research methods and methodologies that provide holistic, in-depth accounts and attempt to reflect the complicated, contextual, interactive, and interpretive nature of our social world.  
(ibid.:1159-1164)

It is appropriate to refer to this study as experiential as the comments sought from the industry leaders as to their perception of the graduates from each school is based solely on their experience of some but not necessarily all of these graduates. Within this experiential framework is the experience of each of the teachers, as they not only shared what they taught but their experience of it, and how their various professional experiences informed their approach. I believe I also fall into the experiential code, as I bring to the analysis my own experience, or lack of it, of the various methodologies and approaches taught in each institution. Clearly the work is grounded in practitioner expertise, relying on the expertise of the teachers interviewed, the industry leaders and my own practitioner expertise in the field.

## **2.2 REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER/ RESEARCHER POSITIONING**

The underpinning research methodology of reflective practice is embraced on several different levels within the study. Loughran (2002) writes:

It is through the development of knowledge and understanding of the practice setting and the ability to recognize and respond to such knowledge that the reflective practitioner becomes truly responsive to the needs, issues, and concerns that are so important in shaping practice.  
(ibid.:42)

I am placing myself as the reflective practitioner, observing, analyzing and pulling apart the acting methodologies employed at each of these institutions and identifying from them the particular elements that are having real outcomes for the graduates. And in the process of being interviewed each teacher has engaged in their own reflection through the articulation of their practice. This document in itself will add to the development of knowledge and to the understanding of practice, as a paper of shared reflection on practice.

There have been some studies, as I have outlined earlier, into acting training methods in Australia, however, most of the researchers involved were working as academics or as career teachers in acting training institutions. Whilst some have had actor-training themselves, few have had substantial careers across a broad platform of the performance industries. I position myself as a practitioner, currently practicing as an actor, director and teacher at a high level within the industry. This practice knowledge has come from 30 years experience in the Australian theatre, film and television industries as actor, director, acting coach on film and television projects, and as teacher at NIDA, WAAPA, QUT (Drama), Practical Aesthetics Australia and in private practice.

Much of the ‘stuff’ that acting teachers draw from in their teaching is tacit in that it is understood rather than known. Michael Polanyi (2003) addressed the motivation behind creative acts by concluding that “we can know more than we can tell” (ibid.:4). The knowledge drawn to uncover

possible truths was referred to as tacit knowledge. This paper hopes to encourage the sharing of this knowledge by making the 'tacit', 'explicit'. Loughran makes clear the result of this process:

For teacher educators, ways of acting and the reasons that direct that action are made explicit when attempting to help others see what it is that matters in one's own practice. An element of 'making the tacit explicit' is the need and ability to recognize what draws one's attention to a situation that might be viewed as problematic.  
(Loughran 2002:34)

Many teachers of acting, setting out to document their process, have balked at the writing down of their knowledge, as what they are trying to explain seems to lose its potency in the setting down on paper. Schön (1983) articulates the difficulty of pinning down knowledge in the following quote:

When we go about the spontaneous, intuitive performance of the actions of everyday life, we show ourselves to be knowledgeable in a special way. Often we cannot say what it is that we know. When we try to describe it we find ourselves at a loss, or we produce descriptions that are obviously inappropriate. Our knowing is ordinarily tacit, implicit in our patterns of action and in our feel for the stuff with which we are dealing. It seems right to say that our knowing is *in* our action.  
(ibid.:49)

Reflective practice is also an essential lens through which to view this study as the very nature of teaching acting is a reflective practice in itself. In the workshop process the teacher responds according to the pathways learned in their own training and other influences that have made an impression upon them. In order to determine what these pathways might be I have examined the background of each teacher to see what lens they bring not just to any particular methodology that they might teach but, almost more importantly, how they would respond 'in-action' to the work presented to them by the students in class and in play rehearsals. 'Reflection-in-action' as coined by Schön, is particularly prevalent in the teaching of acting, as the teacher becomes the problem solver, director and assistant to the interpretation. The making of art is a fluid process of creating and pulling apart and recreating, requiring the teacher to reflect in the moment in order to offer assistance to the developing actor. Schön refers to this 'know-how' as tacit and from this knowledge we reflect *in* action (ibid.).

Day (1999) poses that the very “health and competence” of a profession is enriched by reflection and “that the ability to exercise professional judgment is in fact informed through reflection on practice” (ibid.:34). Loughran (2002) asserts that some professionals were confronted by the idea of reflection as being a process whereby one may be ‘found out’ and therefore seen to not be up to the job, but were however reassured once they committed to the process of journaling and reaped the benefits from it. Reynolds (2011) looks to the organization as a whole when considering reflection. In my final analysis I will gauge the health of each institution through the three modes he suggests: technical, aligned and critical.

### **2.3 ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH**

In line with an ethnographic approach, this social research study possesses features as laid out by Hammersley and Atkinson (2007:3). The subject matter was examined within the already existing environment of each institution; data was gathered from various sources including interviews with staff, published articles regarding each institution, and from interviews with industry leaders who had experience of graduates from each institution; data has been collected in an “unstructured” (ibid.) manner and the analysis has not been given predetermined headings, but rather, headings were arrived at as a result of the data collection; the focus is specific to a small group in order to attain a “detailed study” (ibid.); and “analysis of the data involves interpretation of the meanings, functions and consequences of human actions and institutional practices and how these are implicated in local, perhaps wider, contexts” (ibid.).

As researcher I have examined the cultures within each educational institution and tested the efficacy of the teaching practice against industry expectations and desired outcomes. Ethnography is described by Geertz as “thick description” (Geertz, 1973:9 in Conteh et al, 2005:xxi) and accordingly “the researcher must be part of the world studied”, and which allows “our own constructions of other peoples’ constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to” (ibid.). Within the interview model is the notion of reflexivity, as I, as researcher, am influenced by my own “socio-historical location” (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007:15). This supposes

that I was unable to remain detached entirely from the subject matter of the interview but came to it with my own bias. In acknowledging this I have made very clear transcriptions of the interviews and have resisted analysis of them until the final chapter.

Hammersley and Atkinson pose that engagement in the field may initiate the desire to undertake the research and that the initial question may change throughout the research process (2007:24). I believe my initial curiosity around the subject of how to best train actors in a three year program was ignited when, in 1996, I co-founded Practical Aesthetics Australia, the Sydney Annex of the Atlantic Theatre Company<sup>1</sup>. In the first few years of classes our students were predominately graduates from NIDA, WAAPA, and VCA with a couple from QUT. These students were experiencing such profound shifts in their work as a result of studying Practical Aesthetics that they started to question the training they had received at their respective drama schools. Many felt they had left drama school with too broad a palette of techniques, making their work unspecific. Several agents in Sydney were sending their actors to us as they were noticing a great improvement in audition success rates with one agent telling me recently that she noticed a profound improvement in the work of the actors who attended our classes. Whilst this was very flattering I was not convinced that we could take all the credit. Clearly these actors were at an advantage to study Practical Aesthetics after a comprehensive drama-school training, and, even if they weren't aware of it, they were utilizing all that they had already learnt especially in terms of their vocal and physical awareness. The research question has not changed during the study but certainly many of the discoveries have been surprising and the resultant ideal of how best to train an actor in a three-year program is very different to what I had conceived of prior to this examination.

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<sup>1</sup> The Atlantic Theatre Company was first established by Americans, writer David Mamet and actor William H Macy. They handed the company to a group of their students who have built the company to a very successful off Broadway theatre company and a large studio, teaching the acting methodology *Practical Aesthetics*. The studio teaches full time and part time classes as well as serving New York University as one the studios on offer to NYU undergraduates.

In their discussion on the site of research Hammersley and Atkinson make clear the need to “ ‘case’ possible research sites in order to determine their suitability to the study” (2007:29). In determining which schools to examine I took my lead from my own experience of working with graduates of Australian drama schools. In my own experience I had worked closely with graduates of NIDA, WAAPA, VCA and QUT. I had not worked with graduates from Flinders University or some of the regional acting programs. Whilst I had worked with graduates from the University of Southern Queensland, I determined that only one school from Queensland should be represented in the study and as QUT had a greater presence in the eyes of agents and casting directors in Sydney (as QUT showcases the graduates each year in Sydney), I determined that QUT was more relevant to a national study.

Access to staff at each of the institutions was made by requesting an interview by email. Each head of department forwarded the request on to other staff members. All staff members were keen to be involved and access to them was unimpeded. Interviews were conducted at each school with extra interviews of two of the WAAPA staff conducted during the audition tour in Brisbane.

Interviews with industry leaders were also sought through email requests and, with the exception of one casting director who declined to be interviewed, all were most forthcoming in the interview process. The choice of which industry leaders to interview was indeed selective, and may not represent a complete cross-section of the field. In terms of the agents, two were chosen as they represented both highly sought after actors and ‘emerging’ actors and were very familiar with all of the schools, having practiced in the industry for many years. The casting directors chosen are indicative of a broad cross-section of the film and television industry and include those who attract the most successful projects in the country. There were several Sydney and Melbourne casting directors who were not interviewed for this study and this may represent a limitation in the completeness of this section of the research data. The theatre directors chosen represent a broad cross-section of the industry and include artistic directors, at various stages of their careers, of State Theatre Companies and

medium theatre companies from Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth. Again, this group does not represent the entire body of theatre directors currently working in the Australian theatre and, as the research shows, within this group there are conflicting opinions. All interviews were recorded on a small digital recorder and later transcribed word for word or in bullet point. All comments quoted in the paper are verbatim.

This ethnographic study is time specific, in that the time frame studied was 2000 to 2011, a very specific time in terms of leadership at some of the schools. It must therefore be noted that the findings of this research is particular to this time frame only and that some of the findings may already be irrelevant.

In analyzing the data I approached the staff interviews and industry interviews quite differently. In analyzing the staff interviews I looked for key approaches to the work and identified wherever possible particular influences, aesthetics and belief systems, as well as clearly stated methodologies. In analyzing the industry leader interviews I made lists of comments made about each school in a positive and negative list. This accounted for the often-contradictory nature of the comments made by the one person. In so doing I was able to create a clear picture of exactly what was said about each school. I did pay attention to the tone of some comments that may have been particularly negative of some schools and framed these comments in a more constructive way without negating the content of the comment.

Hammersley and Atkinson suggest that in analyzing data one must move “back and forth between ideas and data” (2007:159). In trying to ascertain the reasons why certain schools were successful in one area and not successful in another I needed to take the data from the staff interviews and make my own assumptions according to the industry leaders reports. This is a tricky area in that my own understanding of acting, acting training and directing actors will of course come into play. I have tried to be as objective as possible and where possible acknowledge my own “socio-historical location” (ibid.:15).



An ethnographic conflict is inherent in this study due to its 'emic' and 'etic' nature. According to Sullivan (2009) the 'emic' view is that of the insider, a position I clearly take as a teacher of actors, an actor myself, and a director of actors. I am however also an 'outsider', adopting the 'etic' view as I am not in full time employment in any of the schools studied, nor am I a casting director, agent or necessarily adopt the view of the theatre directors I interviewed. There are advantages and disadvantages to this position. As discussed previously the possible disadvantage to being an 'insider' is that my position may lack objectivity and with this position I bring my thirty years of experience and well-worn ideas and attitudes. This could also be seen as a distinct advantage as I am able to understand the complexities of teaching actors and working with actors within the contexts of my own experience as a theatre director, acting coach for film and television and as a teacher within a drama school framework. The same could be said in regards to my position as an 'outsider', as the distinct disadvantage is that my understanding of the teaching at each school is limited by the information I gleaned from the interviews and other supporting material. I can only base my understanding of the casting directors, agents and other theatre directors on what information they have supplied me with in the interviews, as I am limited to my own experience as a theatre director. The advantage of the 'emic' position is that I may maintain objectivity and be able to pull the 'thick description' into sense making, unbiased by my own 'insider' knowledge.

The 'emic' view of each school would have me, as researcher, understanding the reasons behind curriculum choices, the particular challenges facing each institution, the historical and managerial frameworks, and the general culture of each school. The 'etic' view of each school could have me, as researcher, making judgments and observations that may or may not be a true reflection of the particular make-up of each school, but at the same time may indeed make my observations more objective. Geertz describes this as "experience-near" and "experience-distant" (Geertz 1976 in Feleppa 1986:244). I believe there is a distinct advantage in occupying both positions, in that I was able to easily access all interviewees due to my professional standing and my professional history with many of those

interviewed, and also maintain a desire to investigate and explore in the hope of creating new knowledge. Whilst in the collection of data I have maintained an 'emic' view, in the analysis of data I have maintained an 'etic' perspective.

## **2.4 METHODS OF COLLECTING DATA**

Appropriate to an ethnographic approach is the variety of methods employed in this study. The data has been collected through structured and semi-structured interviews; observation; questionnaire; and the analysis of previously published articles, course materials, documents and records.

Those interviewed include teaching staff at each institution and industry leaders. The interviews of staff were semi-structured, based on a similar set of questions (see Appendix three). Similarly, the questions to industry leaders were based on a pre-determined set of questions (see Appendix 2). In some instances these questions were answered in an email reply and when interviewing face to face these questions provided the starting point for conversation around the topic. I interviewed teachers from each institution to determine the methodologies taught and the philosophies behind the teaching practice. Interviewees included key full time teaching staff in each institution in acting, voice and movement plus those in managerial positions who may have had an influence on the structure or philosophy of the course.

To determine the effectiveness of the training in terms of employment of the actors, I interviewed industry leaders including six casting directors, two actor agents and ten theatre directors from around the country. In order to assess the graduate's 'castability' in film and television I determined it best to interview the casting directors rather than the producers or directors, as it is the casting directors who have a clear idea of which school the actor has attended and is more likely to develop a relationship with the actors over a period of time. Included were casting directors from Sydney and Melbourne, two agents representing both 'A' list actors and emerging artists and theatre directors included those who have most recently worked with

Bell Shakespeare Company, Sydney Theatre Company, Belvoir Street Theatre, Griffin Theatre Company, Melbourne Theatre Company, Malthouse Theatre, Black Swan State Theatre Company, State Theatre Company of South Australia, Perth Theatre Company, La Boite Theatre Company and the Queensland Theatre Company. A cross-section of gender and professional experience was represented within this cohort. Industry interviewees will remain anonymous when referred to in this study in order to protect professional confidentiality.

The questionnaire surveyed graduates from the institutions between 2000 and 2011, in order to determine if the training had served them well or not in the application of their craft in the industry. Graduates were invited to participate in the survey via an invitation on the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, Equity email newsletter. The graduates followed a link to a web page that asked multiple-choice questions as well as asking them to write a brief answer to some questions (see Appendix one). There was a 'prize' incentive to partake in the questionnaire. This questionnaire asked the graduates what school they attended and asked them to paint a picture of the kind of work they have done since graduation. It asked how their training had helped them in the different media in which they have worked. It also asked them to identify shortcomings in their training, to offer suggestions as to how the training could be improved, if they felt the teaching was effectively delivered, and how the teaching had helped or hindered them in terms of self-esteem and confidence. The graduates had the option to remain anonymous or not.

Due to the poor completion rate of this questionnaire I have deemed the data to not be indicative of a large enough number of graduates from each institution and so have referred to limited information from this research. Whilst 67 respondents went to the questionnaire only 27 completed. I blame poor design of the questionnaire for this result, as there were too many questions regarding income and jobs prior to the questions pertaining to the education at each school. Had there been more multiple-choice questions I may have had a better take-up rate.

In regards to interviewing staff at each institution I have chosen a semi-structured form of interview in the hope that each interviewee will be encouraged to speak freely and openly about their teaching practices, their belief system and the professional and personal influences that colour their approach to actor training. This qualitative research interview in the shape of “conversation as research” (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009:1) “attempts to understand the world from the subjects’ point of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations” (ibid.). According to Kvale and Brinkmann this conversation is a professional one in which “knowledge is constructed in the inter-action between the interviewer and the interviewee” (ibid.). Within this interaction is not only the knowledge and experience of those interviewed but my own professional knowledge and experiences as interviewee. Whilst this has put me in a unique position as a practitioner to listen to the complexities of the trainers experience I could also be seen to be listening from the bias of my own methodology. With the awareness of this I have chosen to represent the findings of all the interviews in as verbatim a style as possible. Only in the analysis section do I draw any conclusions about the methodology taught.

## **2.5 ETHICS STATEMENT**

Ethics Clearance has been granted by the QUT Research Ethics unit and deemed a low risk human research project. Each interviewee signed a consent form acknowledging the nature and purpose of the research. The industry leaders granted consent on the grounds that they would remain anonymous and accordingly the transcriptions of those interviews are not available for public viewing. Whilst the teachers at each institution are named in the research there was no agreement made allowing for the recorded interviews to be available to the public. The graduates ticked a box in the on-line questionnaire, acknowledging their consent, and had the choice of providing their email address or not.

## **2.6 INTERPRETATION AND PRESENTATION**

“Qualitative research is by its nature ‘creative and interpretive’ and qualitative interpretations are constructed” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003:37). From all the data gathered my analysis will therefore present an *interpretation* of the field of study.

This project is an applied ethnographic study. Not only will the outcomes be presented to each of the institutions for their perusal, but it will also serve to outline my own approach forward as a teacher and as a possible program leader in actor training. “The most immediate measure of the significance of applied research is its contribution to decision making” (Chambers, 2003:389). It is my hope that each institution will consider the results of this study in the spirit of sharing knowledge and improving our collective output as actor trainers. The ‘expert’ in this investigation is really the employer of the actors: the casting director, agent and theatre director. As I have had extensive experience in coaching actors for immediate outcome on film and television sets, I will be viewing this information from my own understanding of current practice in the industry.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **NIDA**

#### **3.1 NIDA BACKGROUND**

NIDA, situated in Kensington, Sydney, was established in 1959 as Australia's first formal acting school, initially offering only a two-year course in acting. Over the years courses in many other areas of theatre practice were added as well as a range of training programs for the wider community. Best known however for its acting program, NIDA has long maintained its status as Australia's most prestigious acting school and can count amongst its graduates many internationally renowned actors such as Mel Gibson, Judy Davis, Cate Blanchett, Hugo Weaving and Sam Worthington. According to the NIDA website 'graduates form the backbone of Australia's entertainment industry with many going on to achieve international success' (2013).

#### **3.2 KEY PERSONNEL**

During the time of the scope of this study the key personnel were as follows. In 2008 Lynne Williams replaced Aubrey Mellor (2005-2007) as the director of the school. For the first time in the history of NIDA, Ms Williams was to be both director and chief executive officer. Since 1969 General Manager, Elizabeth Butcher and Director, John Clarke governed NIDA. In 2005 Mellor, who continued to work alongside Elizabeth Butcher, replaced Clarke. The Board decided not to renew Mellor's contract and announced that they were going to appoint a single head of the school. This marked a significant shift in the governance of the school.

The Head of Acting was Tony Knight until July 2011, in 2012 American Jeff Janisheski was placed in the position. Kevin Jackson was employed for most of the period as the senior acting teacher. The voice department was lead by Bill Pepper until 2010 when Katerina Moraitis took up the position. Senior voice teacher Betty Williams remained influential until her

retirement in 2011. Julia Cotton was Head of Movement until 2010 and from 2011 to 2013 Lisa Minnett held the position. Karen Vickery taught history of theatre until 2011. At most times throughout the eleven year scope of this study there were two full time acting teachers, two full time and one part time voice teacher, one full time movement teacher with a part time teacher starting in 2011 and one full time history of theatre teacher with two part time assistants who taught across all courses at NIDA. There were sessional staff employed to teach in each year and staff, as well as national and international guest directors, directed productions. Productions are designed, built and stage-managed by NIDA students from the relevant courses.

### **3.3 BACKGROUND AND INFLUENCES OF KEY PERSONNEL**

#### **3.3.1 ACTING**

##### **3.3.1.1 Tony Knight - Head of Acting 1989-2011**

At the age of 17 Tony Knight began his actor training at NIDA under Aubrey Mellor and George Whaley. Dismissed after one year he went on to study directing at Drama Centre London. Founded in 1963 by a breakaway group of teachers and students from the Central School of Speech and Drama, Drama Centre was led by Yat Malmgren, John Blatchley, and Christopher Fettes. It was a radical school for its time with such theatre innovators as Peter Brook, Glen Byam Shaw and Martha Graham on the Board.<sup>2</sup> Knight cites Malmgren's approach to actor training as having a big influence on his own teaching style. Malmgren was a dancer who was introduced to the work of Rudolf Laban and developed a system of training based on Laban's work and the philosophies of Jungian Psychology. After a few years

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<sup>2</sup> Doreen Cannon was the head of the Drama Centre from 1963 and then head of acting at RADA (Royal Academy of Dramatic Art) from 1985 until her death in 1995. Cannon, raised in New York, had studied with Stella Adler and at the HB studio under Uta Hagan and Herbert Berghof. These teachers were all influenced by Stanislavsky's system of actor training with varying emphasis on emotional preparation. Cannon was the first teacher to introduce method acting to an English drama school: prior to this Stanislavsky was not taught at all in English drama schools.

teaching in Sydney and assistant directing to Rodney Fisher, Knight came to NIDA to teach as part of a three-member teaching-team with Dean Carey and Tony Taylor. In 1990 he was appointed Head of Acting, the position he held for twenty-two years.

### **3.3.1.2 Kevin Jackson – Senior Acting Teacher**

Kevin Jackson is a NIDA graduate and was Head of Acting for four years in the late 1980s. He has taught part time and full time since then, and was the permanent senior acting teacher between 2006 and 2011. When studying at NIDA, John Bell and Aubrey Mellor taught Jackson in what was then a two-year acting course. On graduating in 1971 he became a member of the Old Tote Theatre Company and worked as an actor at Nimrod Theatre Company and Q Theatre Company.<sup>3</sup> Q Theatre's co-founder Doreen Warburton's work with Joan Littlewood at the Theatre Royal Stratford, London, had a strong influence on Jackson.

He noted in interview that in his time studying at NIDA Stanislavsky's name was never mentioned, as training was "very British with an emphasis on speaking well and thinking" (Kevin Jackson interview, NIDA 12 May 2011). There was little emotional preparation work and the only contemporary techniques being explored were those of "Grotowski who was fashionable at the time" (ibid.). He felt it was a time of "sink or swim depending on whether you had the talent or not" (ibid.). In 1981 he received a scholarship to study with the American Conservatory Theatre (ACT) in San Francisco, run by William Ball. Ball was against the predominant American training approach, Method acting, as he believed it stifled creativity. "He wanted to 'uninhibit the actor', enabling him to 'assert himself wildly' and perform with 'a flamboyant, dashing style'" (New York Times, 1991). He championed

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<sup>3</sup> The Old Tote (1962-1978) was a theatre company set up by NIDA to support young artists. Many NIDA students worked with the company alongside well-respected local actors. Graduates would often be given an apprenticeship with the company. Nimrod Theatre Company (1970-1987) was set up as an alternative to the commercial producer JC Williamson, who focused on predominately English works. Nimrod championed new Australian works and reimagined classics, often giving Shakespeare a colloquial resonance. Q Theatre, first established as a lunch time theatre in the Sydney city centre, and later moving out to Penrith in the culturally devoid Western Suburbs of Sydney, was renowned for its emphasis on ensemble and its vast regional touring.



technique over emotion saying: “There's a back door to the Method: if you do the act, the feeling will follow” (ibid.).

It was at ACT that Jackson was introduced to Stanislavsky and an emotional preparation method. Jackson believed that by experiencing the two schools of actor training - the British approach as taught at NIDA and the Stanislavsky work as taught by Ball - he was able to develop a “balanced approach to actor training” (2011). His criticism of “bad English training” was that it was all “technical” and that “bad method acting was all emotional” (ibid.). When, at the age of 36 he became Head of Acting at NIDA, he maintained the training that was already in place but added the American influences. Jackson later returned to teach at ACT where he felt they appreciated his approach as it “is straight on, direct, truth telling, pushing in that sense. I came in asking questions, pushing boundaries, stirring students out of a comfort zone and into a more professional zone of what they needed to do” (ibid.).

The most recent influence on his work has been Anne Bogart’s Viewpoints, which he was introduced to at ACT. He said that a large number of NIDA teachers and guest directors have trained in Viewpoints and have introduced the work to the students in subtle ways that support the teaching. Jackson noted that the core to his teaching technique is Stanislavsky and as he is a fierce reader of plays, biographies, acting teaching manuals, as well as looking at contemporary directors, he draws inspiration from these sources. Consequently he calls his method an “evolving melting pot” (ibid.) of approaches. Whilst he has travelled a lot to the USA he now travels to Europe to stay in tune with contemporary European actor training.

### **3.3.2 VOICE**

There has been a change of staff in the voice department at NIDA with the appointment of Katerina Moraitis in 2010 as Head of Voice. After over 30 years as voice teacher, Betty Williams retired in 2011. From 1995 to 2010 the Head of Voice was Bill Pepper. I will outline first the work of Bill Pepper

and Betty Williams and then track how Katerina Moraitis views the voice training at NIDA and how she is changing it.

### **3.3.2.1 Bill Pepper – Head of Voice 1995 – 2010**

Bill Pepper studied voice at Central School in London in 1989/90, having completed the broader voice and teaching drama course at Central in the early 1980s. Pepper was the head of the voice department at NIDA, teaching all three years and overseeing the post-graduate voice studies course. Pepper studied under David Carey at Central and was taught also by Cicely Berry. He spent six months studying with Kristen Linklater in America and has worked intensively with Rowena Baylos, Barbara Houseman and Frankie Armstrong. Pepper believes he teaches to the requirements of the individual student and was confident that the three years of voice work produced the desired effect in the NIDA graduate. He worked very closely with the acting staff and felt they were acutely aware of the importance of the voice work. In interview with Pepper he noted the importance of the voice studies course and acknowledged how forward thinking it was of NIDA to develop such a course. Graduates from this course are in leadership positions across the country and overseas with both WAAPA and VCA employing voice teachers mentored by Pepper.

### **3.3.2.2 Betty Williams – Voice Teacher**

Betty Williams studied acting at London's Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) in the 1940s and was taught by the acclaimed voice teacher Iris Warren. Two of Warren's most famous students are Cicely Berry and Kristen Linklater with Linklater asserting Warren "had developed her own unique approach to training actors' voices: from inside out rather than outside in. She said: "I want to hear the person, not the voice".<sup>4</sup>As well as Warren, Williams cites her biggest influences as Cicely Berry, Barbara Houseman, Christina Schule, Patsy Rodenberg and Michael McCallion. Williams came to NIDA in 1978 with an approach that she says hasn't changed much

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<sup>4</sup> Linklater, Kristen. website <http://www.kristinlinklater.com/backstory.htm>

though she has “learnt an immense amount from the students she’s taught” (Betty Williams interview NIDA 12 May 2011).

Williams claims her goal over the three years was to develop the actors voice so “it’s capable of doing anything the actor wants it to do and was free, fully expressive and up to the demands of the text” (ibid.). Williams cites that the most important rigors of the three-year training are movement, voice skills and the ability to approach text. She believes that teaching needs to be practical and that it takes many teaching hours to achieve the desired results.

### **3.3.2.3 Katerina Moraitis – current Head of Voice**

Katerina Moraitis trained as an actor at Charles Sturt University in Wagga Wagga under the tutelage of acting and voice teacher Jennifer West who is now Head of Voice at The Actor’s Centre in Sydney. Moraitis worked for a time as an actor and then went on to study Voice at London’s Central School of Speech and Drama (Central School), “the mother of voice training with among its alumni the most renowned voice teachers Cecily Berry and Rose Bruford” (Katerina Moraitis interview NIDA 12 May 2011). Moraitis received an MA in Voice Studies, studying with David Carey who was then the head of the postgraduate voice studies at Central School, currently Head of Voice at RADA. “Areas of study were the basics of voice work and vocal progression, releasing habitual tensions that impede free expressive vocal use, anatomy and physiology,” (ibid.) and most importantly there was an emphasis on vocal pedagogy – how to teach voice. Physical applications used were Laban, Alexander and Roth’s five rhythms.

After seven years teaching at Newcastle University in the United Kingdom, Moraitis was appointed Head of MA Voice Studies at Central School of Speech and Drama. Her biggest influence was Arthur Lessac who believed in “disengaging the intellect in order to allow the creative impulses to text and language and the sounds within text and language to have sensation (allowing the actor to have a) response to those” (ibid.).

### **3.3.3 MOVEMENT**

In 1995 Julia Cotton joined the movement department to work alongside the long-serving and much respected Head of Movement, the late Keith Bain. Bain gradually taught less and less until he retired in 2003. In 2009 Cotton resigned and in 2010 Lisa Minnett took up the position.

#### **3.3.3.1 Julia Cotton –Head of Movement Studies 2003-2009**

Cotton was trained as a classical dancer with the Australian Ballet School and danced with the Australian Ballet. She went on to choreograph for both dance and theatre works for many companies throughout Australia before becoming director of the Australian Theatre for the Deaf for two years. On her appointment at NIDA Cotton was encouraged to create her own course inspired and lead by the work of Keith Bain. Cotton was a great admirer of Bain's work and whilst teaching alongside him she not only sat in on all his classes but also enrolled as a student in his movement studies course. Her influences are broad and include choreographers such as Pina Bausch, DV8, performers with astute physical presence such as Jacques Tati and other performers who bend tradition such as Laurie Anderson. She appreciated that Keith Bain had developed an eclectic mix of approaches to satisfy the needs of the training.

#### **3.3.3.2 Lisa Minnett – Head of Movement 2010-2012**

Minnett was employed to cover all elements of physical training including dance training for students of the new musical theatre component of the acting course. Minnett began her career as a dancer and choreographer. She then trained as an actor at the New World of the Arts in Miami, associated with the University of Florida where, post-training, she taught acting and movement. Minnett explained in interview that the ideology of her training in the USA was that all aspects of movement training were covered including Viewpoints, Butoh, Laban, Feldenkrais and Alexander. Minnett pointed out that there are neither the teachers nor enough time to cover all these areas at NIDA.

### **3.3.4 ACADEMIC STUDIES**

#### **3.3.4.1 Karen Vickery**

Karen Vickery taught the academic studies in theatre at NIDA for 16 years originally in a part time capacity and then as Head of course, until her resignation in 2011. Vickery graduated as an actor from NIDA in 1983 and went on to gain a Masters degree in Performance Studies at the University of New South Wales. Vickery taught across all courses and also directed the actors, most frequently in first year. Her approach to directing is inspired by the later work of Stanislavsky as taught to her by the late Nick Enright. Whilst assisting Enright and translating for him she witnessed his clear shift in approach to actor training, from encouraging the student actor to make a decision of what action to play on each line, to a more active analysis. Vickery developed the unit of study, *Arts and Ideas*, covering a broad spectrum of performance studies and a time line of the allied arts. These include the study of novels, music, art, architecture, philosophy and science.

### **3.4 METHODOLOGY AND COURSE STRUCTURE**

NIDA accepts twenty-four actors into the three-year program from a group of over fifteen hundred applicants, auditioning in each capital city around Australia, as well as Alice Springs and one North Queensland city, alternating each year between Townsville and Cairns. Since 2010 six of the twenty-four places have been held for musical theatre students who must first pass the acting audition. NIDA now commits to these students for the three years whereas there used to be a culling process at the end of each year. In extreme circumstances a student may still be asked to leave. First year is the foundation year, with a focus on skills training. In second year these skills classes continue as the actors also focus on play production and in third year there is less emphasis on the skills classes and more on the productions. Throughout all three years there are screen skills classes and projects.

Jackson outlines the first year course structure in an overview document to the students,<sup>5</sup> in which he states that the first year of training will raise the “unconscious technique of each artist to a place of constructive self-consciousness” (Jackson, Acting One overview, internal document). Jackson believed it was important for the first year students to develop a ‘creative habit’, as outlined by Twyla Tharp (Tharp 2003). His aim was to “develop an habitual approach to the work so it becomes second nature ....when you have a problem we’ll have given you a technique which you can creatively go back to” (Jackson interview 2011).

The work studied in first year is Stanislavsky based with other methodologies being taught by full time and part time staff. Jackson outlines in his overview that these methodologies include those by Michel Saint-Denis, Meyerhold, Rudolf Laban, Michael Chekhov, Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, Sanford Meisner, Jean-Louis Barrault, Jerzy Grotowski, Jacques Lecoq, Yat Malgrem, David Mamet, Mike Leigh, Anne Bogart, Susan Batson and Ivana Chubbick.

Initially students learn in “a very open creative way” (ibid.), participating in improvisation with part time tutor and NIDA graduate Lyn Pierce, and in the observation exercise, Rock Star,<sup>6</sup> taught by Antoinette Sampson, also a NIDA graduate. Congruous with this work was Knight’s introduction of Stanislavsky’s textual preparation<sup>7</sup> and in voice and movement classes the students were taking their “awareness to an appreciative place where they (could) start to master it so they (came) out of choice and not out of habit” (ibid.).

In establishing the creative habit Jackson asked the students to develop a systemized way to approach the work, including background research, linear preparation and personalization. Background research included the reading of the play, other plays by the same writer, the biography of the

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<sup>5</sup> Jackson made this document available to me though it is not a published document.

<sup>6</sup> Rock star is an observation exercise in which the student actor makes detailed behavioral observation of the ‘rock star’ or similar person of fame and explores the physicalising of this persona.

<sup>7</sup> This preparation is in line with the early and mid career work of Stanislavsky, encouraging the actor to pre-determine the character’s objective, super-objective and actions on each line.

writer, theatrical critical response, and literary responses to that work. An examination of the play in light of the writer's biography and of contemporary influences was encouraged. Linear work was then attended to with the close examination of the dictionary meaning of many of the words, both those already understood and those not understood. Jackson stated that he is "famous or infamous" for his attention to the syntax of the text, claiming "there are rules about the length of each punctuation mark in terms of timing and each writer may apply particular rules to the text" (ibid.). Jackson cites David Mamet as saying "If you just say what I've written and do what I ask you'll be able to act the play" (ibid.). Jackson did concede that there was another 10 percent of work between a good performance and great one. He believes that the actor is not learning their lines but learning a musical score, as supported by renowned playwrights Edward Albee and Harold Pinter, who allude to writing a score when shaping their plays. He felt that "in his time at NIDA, the voice teachers passionately supported this approach to text" (ibid.). He believed that as the actor is sourcing the meaning of words the personalization process has already started – "the inner monologue or thought process is happening" (ibid.). This work was taught by using a short unidentified speech, a two-minute Australian scene and then graduating to a six to ten minute scene from 'International English speaking literature' (Jackson Acting One overview).

Jackson claimed that there is a common problem with most young actors.

They act from what they feel and as a result they change the writing and substitute words and so reduce the text to themselves rather than using the technical work to expand themselves to the level of the writer. The syntax is the best part of the acting - that's where you can act most originally because the writer isn't telling you what the thought is but he's indicated there is one.  
(Jackson interview 2011)

The actors continue with this work determining the 'who, what, when, where, why' of their character in the scene. Jackson asserts that the actor will develop the habit of going back to a part of their creative habit as a "way of restraining themselves from doing the impulsive work on the

emotional stuff” (ibid.). Whilst an actor must never deny their impulse, the actor must “harness their impulse to the text” (ibid.).

By encouraging them to associate with the ‘act’ within the scene, Jackson introduced the first year actors to personalization. He equated the killing of a king to the killing of a cockroach. This sense memory is expanded by the imagination to serve the actor in the scene. By using examples from his own life Jackson encouraged the actors to know themselves and to have the courage to use that knowledge in the work. “The limitations of the actor’s experience will be challenged, as actors are encouraged to solve problems in the work without reverting to habitual choices” (ibid.). In the first year his aim was for the actors to “develop muscles in areas that they may be psychologically blocking or withholding or not even dealing with” (ibid.). They were encouraged to expand their knowledge of novels, films, television series, plays and documentaries in order to increase the secondary resource of personalization to assist the actor in finding the “truth” (ibid.). He encouraged them to understand fully the world of the play they’re working on and in the third term of first year Jackson lead them through a Chekhov immersion, assisted by Karen Vickery, in which they were immersed into the Russian world studying the politics, the arts, the food, and the culture. Jackson says “the principle mantra for the first two years at NIDA is to fail gloriously” (ibid.). He stresses that his main concern is “to make them better people rather than better actors - that they need to understand humanity rather than judge it, in order to expand themselves as artists” (ibid.).

Jackson is skeptical of Stanislavsky’s later active analysis work, believing it to be underdeveloped and under recorded. When he sees Egil Kipste’s (Head of Directing at NIDA) direction (influenced by Stanislavsky’s later work in active analysis as taught by Sharon Carnicke (1998)) “it’s the technique that’s shown and not the play itself and so it becomes a demonstration of an exercise” (ibid.). He believes that he and Kipste are having an unspoken philosophical debate. The main point of difference being that Jackson believes “the writer is God whereas Kipste believes the writer is dead” (ibid.).



The skills classes are continued through second year where the actors are expected to have developed a creative habit. From observing Knight's second-year acting class I could deduce that his main theories of teaching acting were solidly grounded in Stanislavsky's use of action/objective and given circumstances and influenced by the physical awareness techniques of Rudolf Laban. In this class, the students worked through a detailed checklist of preparation that included asking the five questions of Who, What, When, Where and Why; Who am I? What do I want? When is it? Where am I? Why do I want it? (the actor's motivation in the scene) as well as 'How' am I going to get it? (the tactics the actor will use to achieve the motivation). These tactics were applied to each line prior to working on the floor. Students were also encouraged to look at the outer and inner obstacles to the achievement of their objective and to consider the super objective of the character throughout the play.

Knight also suggested to the students that they should consider the physical life of the character through Laban efforts or animal observation. The experiential life of the character was examined, by asking what the character might be sensing, thinking, intuiting and/or feeling. The actors were encouraged to write a biography of their character's life up to the starting point in the play, drawing on themes and information from the play to possibly give explanation to the character's motivations. The students were also encouraged to explore a private moment the character may experience that may provide a key to the secret life of the character. In order to give full value to the spoken text the students were encouraged to connect to the imagery in the writing. The elements of this system of training were introduced to the students throughout first and second year with the expectation that by mid second year the student was effortlessly practicing this approach.

In interview with Knight he claimed that ultimately imagination was the most important attribute for the actor and was wary of acting methodologies that stifle that imagination. This sentiment was shared by Betty Williams who believes that the imagination is the key to an interesting responsive voice, and as the actor is only as interesting as their imagination

it is the imagination that she works on. Williams claims that the challenges are greater today as young people are “not used to speaking and suffer appalling grammar and limited vocabulary” (Betty Williams interview, NIDA 12 May 2011). Williams has worked very closely with Tony Knight and Kevin Jackson, with whom she shares a common vision but she finds that many outside directors may be less detailed with the text. She is critical of young directors who, “depending on their own training, often have a poor facility with text and may be prone to directing their interpretation of the text rather than solving the problems from the page” (ibid.).

Pepper also expressed some concern about visiting directors who he felt did not understand the importance of the voice work. Pepper adopted the same attitude as Cicely Berry in the belief that “to free the voice is to free the person” (Bill Pepper, telephone interview 22 Nov 2012). He was always mindful that under everything he did with the actors he was serving this ultimate goal of freeing the person so the mind was free to enter the work. Pepper taught in a very physical manner and was keen to present the students with imaginative exercises. He feels that the basics of voice teaching have not changed that much over the years and that the trends have been set most profoundly by Berry and also by Linklater.

In interview Moraitis outlined her approach to teaching voice at NIDA. She explained that the voice work focus in first year is foundation work involving “stripping students of habitual tensions and patterns that impede communication” (Moraitis interview 2011). This does not mean stripping them “back from their life experiences or wanting them to be cardboard cut outs but rather it’s those tensions of habitual patterns that are going to impede the expressive possibilities for the actor” (ibid.). Students will learn how to relax but energize at the same time.

By the end of first year they will have gone through the whole vocal progression including basic presence work, breath work - capacity, support, placement for expressive communication, phonation and resonance and articulation. Articulation involves stripping habitual tensions and developing muscularity in the area of the tongue, jaw and lips.  
(ibid.)

Moraitis stressed how important it is to address discipline in the actors practice including the use of reflection on their practice. She claims that reflection is “a self-teaching progression” (ibid.). Moraitis was outspoken in her negative view of voice training in Australia. She felt that the training had sometimes “gone through the right channels but the technique was very poor” (ibid.). She was critical of the NIDA students who, when she first met them, “had no muscularity or consonant clarity” (ibid.) and didn’t dress appropriately to work on their voice in a physical way. She felt there was a culture of looking to the teachers to be told if they were right or wrong rather than self-monitoring. They were also relying on the teachers to run the warm ups rather than doing the warm up individually. This all confirmed for her that the ideas inherent in the process were there but not the practice. “The actual embodiment of the fundamentals of voice practice have been lacking. It’s about current pedagogical practice. The practice at NIDA is old - we’ve moved on in the UK” (ibid.).

Moraitis outlined how contemporary teaching practice in the UK integrates physical work into the vocal work using Alexander and Laban.

If the physical body is working on Stanislavsky, something you do physically can create an emotional impulse and is expressed in sound. Modern training has become about finding the voice in the body and finding the subtext, the ideas, the images and the emotions that then propel the voice out in an open way.  
(ibid.)

This work is supported by the teachings of Cicely Berry and Arthur Lessac. Whilst Moraitis respects the work of Linklater and uses some of her exercises, she finds an element of the work distressing to the actor and, like method acting, confuses technique with delving into ones own psyche. Moraitis works mainly with the principles of Stanislavsky and whilst she believes the method work can be valuable in some instances she feels it’s important for an actor not to go to emotion first as it leads to “placing emotion onto the text rather than allowing the text to affect you” (ibid.). She is critical of acting techniques that “encourage actors to be real rather than to express” (ibid.).

In my interview with Cotton she outlined the movement program over the three years. The focus of the movement work in first year was on awareness of self and awareness of others in the space moving into ensemble building. Cotton was always keen that the actor knew there was no right or wrong in this exploration with the focus being on becoming in tune with your own physicality. After emphasis on “freeing up and becoming more physically confident and capable” (Cotton, telephone interview, August 4 2012) the actors were introduced to technical aspects of movement including conditioning, flexibility, strength, co-ordination and the fundamentals of dance. The work extended into group work with emphasis on timing, energy and peripheral vision.

Towards the end of first year partner work was introduced, involving trust, physical response, giving and receiving weight, lifting, falling and supporting. This work was also explored in relation to scene work. Period dance and manners, and work with costume and props were also covered in first year. At the end of first year the actors were involved in a physical theatre project, the bodyline project, with the movement studies students.

In second year the dance classes were more advanced moving towards a music theatre presentation in the final term. With the focus on physical transformation from self to character the students became more aware of body language, studying gesture and energy. Yoga was introduced to all students to encourage relaxation and mind body connection. The second year students were challenged with the demanding task of creating a solo movement piece, encouraging them to be imaginative and brave. In third year there was less time spent in class and more time spent supporting the productions. A lot of the work covered in earlier years was consolidated with more emphasis on physical confidence and presentation in auditions, interviews and on the red carpet.

Cotton’s desire was to produce:

..physically articulate bodies that could be read in subtle expression. Bodies that were physically confident, self assured and adaptable in terms of how they worked on stage, in front of the screen and in the business of being an actor. Actors with a good work ethic, working well in a group and being technically expressive in any physicality be

it in choreographed movement or with any other physical demands made upon them.  
(ibid.)

Cotton felt the movement course was undervalued with more emphasis being put on text than movement. She was the only full time movement teacher assisted by occasional sessional staff. In comparison there were two full time voice teachers and one part time voice teacher.

Cotton is skeptical about teaching one particular approach as she feels that approach will always be taught through the lens of the teacher and therefore may lack the original inspiration that developed the system. It is clear that many of the aspects that Cotton has covered are now systemized in certain techniques such as Anne Bogart's Viewpoints. She was pleased when Viewpoints was formalised as it put into a method all that she had been teaching for years. Cotton's main criticism of her time at NIDA was the lack of self generated work, "projects that relied more on creativity, imagination and exploration rather than the intellectual approach that seemed to take precedence" (ibid.).

Minnett worked with part time movement teacher Scott Witt and together they covered different aspects of different training systems for the different years of training. This included Viewpoints, Suzuki, Lecoq, dance appropriate to the productions and other strategies to help the actors acknowledge their physical strengths and weaknesses. Minnett was keen to encourage a mind body connection through the more relaxing meditative mind body connection work of Yoga, Pilates and Tai Chi, acknowledging that the more flexible the body the more flexible the mind. The Alexander work that was in the movement department is now in the voice department as it's so integral to good voice production. Minnett's goal was to "achieve good alignment and flexibility within the actor encouraging a relaxation that's not floppy" (Lisa Minnett interview, NIDA 12 May 2011).

Students were assessed for the written work covered in *Arts and Ideas*, a broad spectrum of performance studies and a time line of the allied arts.

This course of study, overseen by Karen Vickery, included the study of novels, music, art, architecture, philosophy and science.

### **3.5 RECENT DEVELOPMENTS AT NIDA**

Lynne Williams' first task as the new Director and CEO of NIDA was to review the course content of the acting degree by seeking input from industry professionals, alumni, current students and the Board of Studies to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the course. This investigation revealed that NIDA was viewed by the industry as being traditional, conventional and mostly focused on theatre training. Williams was surprised to see that discussions about "contemporary performance that were had in the nineties in Europe were still met with resistance amongst the staff at NIDA" (Lynne Williams interview, NIDA, 1 February 2012). It was apparent that there was a lack of skills in self-devising theatre and in film technique training.

To rectify the lack of acting for camera training, established director and producer Di Drew was appointed Head of Film and Television and in turn Drew negotiated a sponsorship with Channel Seven to build a working studio complete with several easily changed sets, lights and three cameras. This has allowed for the actors across all three years of training to now have more time working in a practical sense on screen performance.

Williams also introduced an artist in residence who would challenge the students in cross-platform performance, an area that was well explored in Europe but she found was met with resistance at NIDA, as the focus was on text-based performance. Williams believes that students should test their practice against industry standards and "to learn those negotiating skills that we all need to know" and so is not in favor of directors of the student productions being 'teacher' directors (ibid.). She is keen to change both the philosophy and pedagogy of the school to encourage actors to further their training upon graduation. "There has been a perception amongst graduates that because they have been to NIDA they need no more training" (ibid.). She believes this has bred arrogance and inflexibility amongst those

graduates. Williams has changed the structure of the year from a three term to a four-term year, allowing for less burnout as staff and students are not always working on a production. Term one and three are focused on teaching, academic pursuit, studio time, own work time and preparation. Term two and four are focused on production. Williams points out that “it isn’t as clear-cut as that as classes continue throughout the production terms” (ibid.).

Williams feels that in some areas the quality of teaching has improved since some recent staff changes so that the actors are learning a lot more in a shorter amount of time. Williams was surprised at how the students were “mollycoddled” (ibid.). She felt that it was not supportive of the actors independence to have staff run voice warm ups prior to each performance. Williams asked Katerina Moraitis to come up with a whole new model of teaching voice that put the responsibility onto the student to be responsible for their own developmental arc. This reflects a move in education that is opposed to the notion of the teacher being the ‘expert’ and the student having to get it ‘right’. Williams acknowledges that the training is really only two years as traditionally the focus in third year has been on productions with little further training. Williams believes that “with such a big emphasis on the industry viewing these third year productions it has inhibited the level of risk taking from the students” (ibid.). Williams acknowledges that there has been a resistance amongst the student body to work with the students of the playwriting course and auteur directors. “The students only have four plays in order to get it right and therefore feel they should be working on an extant text” (ibid.).

Williams wants actors at NIDA who want to be part of the change process, who want to create new art forms. Williams, like most of the staff I spoke to from all the institutions, believes that the acting course should be four years in order to cover all aspects of the actors training.

Williams was told by one industry leader that they were not interested in NIDA graduates as they were boring, a perception she is determined to change. Williams is benchmarking the school against schools in Europe and

the USA and not against any other Australian schools. In the ongoing accreditation review, the NSW Education Department has made it very clear to NIDA that they are concerned about the nexus between scholarship and practice-based learning. As a result every teacher has had to be very clear about the organizations pedagogical approach. Another new initiative is to develop research at NIDA, with support being given to staff to produce papers, speak at conferences and reflect on their own practice. There is also a new teaching and learning manager to assist each head of study area to refine their approach. Williams believes there is now a greater need for clear course outlines and transparent assessment outcomes. “The shift in thinking from the top is that it’s not enough to say we see teaching as ‘learning by doing’, there needs to be greater clarity around the pedagogy” (ibid.). NIDA now has money from the Federal Government to do a feasibility study into the establishment of a ‘Centre for Contemporary Performance Practice’.

Whilst the appointment of the new Head of Acting, Jeff Janisheski, is outside the scope of this investigation I felt it was important to include a perspective of his training and his vision, particularly in light of recent criticisms leveled at him by Chris Puplick in his recent platform paper (2012).

In 2012 NIDA appointed a new head of acting, American director Jeff Janisheski. Janisheski describes his journey as “eclectic and wide-ranging” (Jeff Janisheski interview, NIDA 1 February 2012). He began his artistic career as a visual artist and then trained as a dancer and choreographer, later specializing in Butoh, the Japanese experimental dance form. He taught Butoh for ten years and then chose to move away from the avant-garde and experimental techniques in search of the fundamental basics of communicating with an actor. He was keen to create truthful performances in actors that were also powerfully theatrical. He went on to train as a director in the MFA program at Columbia University, under the tutelage of Anne Bogart and Brian Kulick. Bogart, artistic director of SITI Company in New York, is famous for her acting training approach, Viewpoints. Kulick is



the artistic director of the Classics Stage Company, New York, where Janisheski was associate director for four years.

Most recently Janisheski was Artistic Director for the National Theatre Institute at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Centre. From working with Bogart he has a strong foundation in devising work and from the work in the classics he has a strong grounding in text-based theatre. These two seemingly opposing acting influences were key to cementing Janisheski's approach to actor training. His belief is that two very different acting approaches taught at the same time could best serve the student actor's discovery of both truth and theatricality. Janisheski condenses his approach down to three key principles: truth, theatricality and transformation. He is not concerned with how 'truth' is achieved, whether from an inside-out approach like the method work or from an outside-in approach such as that outlined by Meyerhold. "Both are valid, it's the end result that's important" (ibid.). He wishes to encourage the sense of theatricality by encouraging students to make bold choices and to be physical in their approach to the work, be it for stage or for screen. He is keen to develop transformative actors who can not only move from one role to another with the ability to bring something very different to each, but who can also move from one medium to another effortlessly. In summary Janisheski is keen to "build on the already excellent tradition of NIDA by exposing the students to many different approaches and so enabling virtuosic performance" (ibid.).

### **3.6 NIDA SUMMARY**

There have been many changes at NIDA since the time frame of this study including the appointment of a new Head of Acting, a new Head of Voice and the application of a new governing structure. Within the time frame the methodology could be summed up as a comprehensive training in the acting principles of Stanislavsky's action and objective analysis with many other influences being taught by sessional staff and guest directors. There was a very strong vocal discipline supported by the acting staff with particular attention being paid to the importance of syntax in speech.

Students were also exposed to the methodologies, in varying degrees, of the following teachers: Michel Saint-Denis, Meyerhold, Rudolf Laban, Michael Chekhov, Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, Sanford Meisner, Jean-Louis Barrault, Jerzy Grotowski, Jacques Lecoq, Yat Malgrem, David Mamet, Mike Leigh, Anne Bogart, Susan Batson and Ivana Chubbick. Whilst there was a comprehensive movement program in place it was felt by movement teacher Julia Cotton that greater emphasis was placed on voice training than movement training.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **QUT**

#### **4.1 QUT BACKGROUND**

Beginning in the late 1970s as a two year Associate Diploma in Acting (at what was then known as Kelvin Grove College of Advanced Education), the Acting course at QUT is now a three year Bachelor of Fine Arts degree positioned within a large Drama discipline in the Creative Industries Faculty. The Head of Acting is Senior Lecturer Dianne Eden and Head Lecturer in Acting is American, Leonard Meenach. During the time of investigation the first year acting teachers were Martin Challis, followed by American trainers Kenneth Ransom and then Charles Allen. With a full time teaching staff of only three and with the adoption of an American 'method' approach, QUT differs greatly from the other schools both in course content and school structure. QUT's acting alumni is highly prized by the university and includes notable nationally successful actors such as Anna McGahan, Deborah Mailman, Wayne Blair, Gyton Grantly and Michael Dorman.

#### **4.2 KEY PERSONNEL**

Eden is not only the course coordinator but also the primary voice teacher across all three years. Leonard Meenach is the primary acting teacher for second and third year as well as directing some second and third year productions and directing the graduate show reel. There is a full time acting teacher responsible for the first year acting class. This position was held until 2005 by WAAPA trained Australian actor Martin Challis, until 2009 by UCLA trained American actor Kenneth Ransom and until 2012 by Eric Morris trained American actor Charles Allen. Additional movement and voice classes are taught by sessional staff, and students attend lectures in the history of theatre run by the QUT Drama department. Productions are directed by QUT graduates, professional directors from the local theatre industry, by QUT BFA Acting and QUT Drama staff and occasionally by

visiting international directors. Productions are given technical support by BFA Technical Production students.

### **4.3 BACKGROUND AND INFLUENCES OF KEY PERSONNEL**

#### **4.3.1 Dianne Eden – Senior lecturer, Head of Acting**

Eden's journey began when, as a speech and drama teacher working with young actors, she felt insecure about her own theatrical qualifications. With no formal training she set off to be an actor, spending thirteen years working in film, television and on stage. Over a period of ten years she studied with Kristen Linklater and Tina Packer at *Shakespeare and Company* in the USA, becoming a certified Linklater teacher and a master teacher of text. She also spent some months with Cicely Berry and Patsy Rodenberg, gaining a strong insight into their aesthetic. She taught at the Californian Institute of Arts under Linklater master teacher Fran Bennett and master acting teacher Robert Benedetti as well as working at UCLA with Mel Shapiro. These experiences led her to the belief that the voice teacher was an acting teacher and that the acting teacher was a voice teacher and she holds that "this was not the accepted wisdom in Australia at the time" (Dianne Eden interview QUT, 8 November 2011).

Eden has been very successful in lifting the profile of the QUT actors, having led the way in producing professionally made show reels six years before NIDA did, and has been travelling a showcase to Sydney for many years. As there is so much focus on screen acting, many of the graduates have been successful in film and particularly in television and Eden believes "the graduates cope well with the technical demands of the set" (ibid.).

An initiative unique to QUT that Eden has introduced is the use of sports performance psychologist Phil Jauncey who works with both the staff and the students, enabling the students to understand how the teachers teach and the teachers to understand how the students learn. He now accompanies the group to the showcase in Sydney and Eden believes there

has been a marked improvement in the confidence of the graduates as a result of his work.

#### **4.3.2 Leonard Meenach – Head Lecturer in Acting**

Leonard Meenach grew up in the United States of America and received a BFA in Acting and an MFA in Acting and Directing from the University of Arizona. The influences in his training were predominately ‘method’ as taught by Lee Strasberg and Stella Adler. He started out as an actor but was drawn into directing. On moving to Los Angeles he started teaching at Cal State University where he was offered a professorship in which he was to teach acting and study under Arthur Lessac, teaching voice with him. The acting text taught at Cal State was *The Practical Handbook for the Actor* (Bruder et al, 1986), the text for the acting methodology Practical Aesthetics, and Meenach was given a lot of license as to how he taught it. He is a certified Lessac teacher,<sup>8</sup> having spent his thirties working alongside Lessac. Other influences on his acting methodology were José Quintero, founder of the Circle in the Square theatre in New York. Quintero taught at Cal State and according to Meenach was “Stanislavsky based in his approach though he didn’t actually talk about actions and objectives” (Leonard Meenach interview QUT 8 November 2011). Meenach spoke of how, when working on a Eugene O’Neill play, Quintero used “the humanistic approach to character”, by insisting Meenach “really felt the pain of the character” (ibid.).

#### **4.4 METHODOLOGY AND COURSE STRUCTURE**

Sixteen students are accepted into first year with approximately four hundred auditioning. Unlike the other drama schools Eden points out that many of the first year students will be fresh from school, making the QUT graduates on average a much younger cohort than at the other schools. Eden expressed concern that they are not getting the diversity of student

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<sup>8</sup> Arthur Lessac developed a vocal pedagogy incorporating physical training. According to the Lessac institute website: “Lessac Kinesensic Training is a comprehensive and creative approach to developing the voice and the body in a holistic way resulting in greater flexibility and power and improved expressiveness and communication”.

that she'd prefer and is conducting auditions in Melbourne in 2012 in the hope of attracting a more diverse cultural mix into the course. She feels indigenous students are more attracted to ACPA (the Aboriginal Centre for Performing Arts) than to QUT. All students are supported through the three-year training with no one being dismissed at the end of first or second year. First year is the instrument year, second year the diagnostic year and third year the professional year. The focus in first year is on training the actor to uncover a range of true emotions, taught through a series of detailed studio exercises, supported by on-going voice and movement training. The diagnostic year advances this early training, deepening the actor's experience of the 'being state' and applying the work to different styles of text. The focus in third year is preparing the student for graduation as they work with more outside directors, record the showreel and spend less time in studio training sessions.

The course structure has changed over the time of Eden's tenure from having no central acting methodology, with many different approaches being taught by a large group of sessional staff, to the current curriculum of a unified philosophy. Eden felt that it was only the voice work that remained consistent through her application and that if the course were to be shaped into a more professional model there would need to be a single vision in methodology. Eden sought applicants both internationally and nationally for an acting lecturer who might deliver this vision, but found that Australian applicants had no formal teaching pedagogy, mostly having trained at NIDA as actors. Meenach was successful in his application because of his lengthy teaching history and his ability to bring a "strong structured repeatable methodology" (Eden interview 2011). Meenach's methodology is based on the work of Eric Morris who developed his own approach based on the method work of Lee Strasberg. According to Eden the major change in the training at QUT has been that the actors now work moment to moment with the work allowing the "actors to work from themselves" and that this is "the vital step missing from the Stanislavsky books" (ibid.).

In interview with Meenach he explained that in his search for a technique that would deal directly with actor's performance fear, he was led to Eric Morris. "Morris' work explored the actor's instrument in order to get in touch with a whole range of expression" (Meenach interview 2011). Meenach claims this is very similar to the work of Jerzy Grotowski with whom he had worked on two occasions. He refers to 'the instrument' as being the whole actor, encompassing voice and movement but primarily dealing with the actors ability to access emotion and to achieve the 'being state' (ibid.). Meenach's aim is to have the actor be secure in expressing the whole gamut of emotions with actors working on their anger, vulnerability and sexuality. He claims this work to be pure Stanislavsky as he encourages the exposure of these elements both internally and externally. He believes that once the actor is comfortable instrumentally then text can be brought in. Once the actor has explored the instrumental work they can then go back to the textual analysis with the confidence that the instrument is "primed for the obligations of the scene" (ibid.). The obligations of the scene are similar to the given circumstances questions posed by Stanislavsky and include character, emotion, relationship, time and place, and "understanding how like and/or unlike the character is to you psychologically, emotionally and physically" (ibid.). Meenach offers that it takes thirty days to shift "organically" from the actor's physicality and accent to the obligations of character. He may use available stimuli to assist the actors in relating to the given circumstances.

Once the actor has broken down the scene obligations they will have an "intellectual understanding of what kind of being state is required and what parts of the actor are required to be available for that" (ibid.). The actor will then work off available stimuli including the other actors in the scene, moment to moment. The influence of Meisner's work is clear as Meenach focuses on training in involvement. Whilst some may refer to his process as 'breaking down' he doesn't like that term. His method encourages the actor to start where they are and use a series of exercises "that forces them to start to express parts of themselves that they're habitually cut off from" (ibid.). They continue to "work on the actor in process whilst introducing

text through a series of exercises that give the actor as many tools as they might need in their work” (ibid.).

Though not previously familiar with the Eric Morris work prior to meeting Meenach, Eden sees it as “a portal into method work that starts the person back with themselves first” (Eden interview 2011). Whilst Eden did not enjoy “having the American guru teacher make (her) cry” (ibid.), when she studied with Eric Morris, she says the method works well for the students who “adore it and they feel safe in it. The work doesn’t depend on themselves and remembering your dead cat and making you cry– it’s easier than that - getting your body free and knowing that you can get angry and knowing you can be vulnerable, knowing you can be any emotional cocktail and then working with the text and knowing your obligations of time and place, relationship, emotional and psychological make-up, style of the piece, and historical obligations” (ibid.). Eden says that characterisation is not used at all with the students always bringing themselves to the text. They do refer to Jungian sub personalities and an actor might have to work on a particular element of themselves to identify with the character. Eden gives the example of a very strong dominant actor playing Jane Eyre needing to work for a while on her frightened child. Eden is always keeping an eye out for how the students are coping with the internal investigation and offers great support to the first year students through their journey. She says she is “very wary of the ego of any teacher getting in the way of the work” (ibid.).

As well as acting methodology classes, the students are taught a number of different skills, depending on the needs of each group, including voice, text, combat, movement and singing. These skills classes are continued throughout second year but not into third year. Productions begin in second year, firstly with a naturalistic verbatim piece, helping the actors to use more of themselves in the text, and then moving on to a Chekhov production. Eden says this production is “always awful but they love it and they’re never the same after - they understand subtext then” (ibid.). Meenach points out that outside directors have been critical of how limited the actors are in textual work at the beginning of second year but he believes that that is the director’s job and that the success of the actors in



these productions will depend on the skill of the director. These productions are often directed by QUT graduates, so the actors can comfortably bring their process in to the rehearsal room. After these two productions the actors undertake a film shoot directed by Meenach. Eden teaches the voice work across the three years and says the first year is “usually very noisy as the work has a high emotional content” (ibid.). She conducts a one-month Shakespeare intensive in second year, which leads into the rehearsal of a Shakespearean production, usually directed by an outside director, giving the students a different perspective on the work.

Eden explained that due to limited budget the actors no longer have classes in third year but concentrate on a full day rehearsal on the production or the show reel. Meenach directs the first production in third year, giving the actors a chance to gel their process but after that they will be working with a professional director who will have no knowledge or concern about their process. This is the time that the actor moves from a conscious experience of their process to being able to fulfill the director’s requirements.

In her role as voice teacher Eden feels “caught between training actors who are voice lead and encouraging believability in the actor” (ibid.). Her first criteria for assessment is always believability and she is still determining how to best include the acting process into the voice class. Eden is aware that the actors don’t graduate with the best vocal development as they have such a limited time in voice class. If she had more money in her budget she would add voice and movement classes and another film unit to third year. Eden sees her classes as more of an acting class these days and she also spends time with the acting teacher in their class.

Meenach believes the strength of the QUT graduate is that they are able to bring their sexuality and their likeability to the work as well as their darker side, satanic energies and their vulnerability. He believes the good graduates have a real presence and a sense of danger, not just in their work but also in themselves, a presence that’s palpable when they walk in the room. “This is the ‘x’ factor that translates so well on screen – sexuality, vulnerability, danger and likeability” (Meenach interview 2011). Meenach

believes the strength of the Eric Morris work is that it channels the actor's demons. "The demon is all your insecurities, anxieties, self esteem fears and anxieties – we roll it all up into one ball and call it the demon and they deal directly with that demon and it's what will get in the way of your performance – unless you can learn to get in touch with that fear and channel it into areas of expression like confrontation and anger" (ibid.). Meenach explains that accessing of emotion is close to 'effective memory' and does involve some 'emotional recall' as it's about personalizing the state of the character as closely as possible. "They're learning three things - learning how to deal with an imaginary image, how to project that image out and how to express themselves to that image" (ibid.).

Meenach believes his goal in teaching is "to create a repeatable organic process for believability" (ibid.). He points out that he is considered a Morris teacher because he uses that language but he really draws on many different influences. Because of Meenach's experience in teaching voice he believes he has a keen ear for when the actor is or is not connected to their emotional life. He hopes that the voice classes are giving them a strong technical grounding so they really have a feel in their body as to what their voice can do. Like so many of the other heads of schools Meenach bemoans the lack of teaching time and feels the students would benefit from an extra year of training.

Eden has established QUT 5, a formal support structure for the QUT graduates where, for five years after graduation, graduates will meet up in Sydney, the preferred place to start a career, and discuss how their careers are progressing. According to Eden there is a very strong bond between graduates, as indicated by the number of supportive graduates who attend the showcase each year. She praises QUT graduates with good self-management and self-knowledge skills, enabling them to cope well in the uncertainty of the industry. Due to the emphasis on screen acting "the actors can very quickly get into the being state" (Eden interview 2011). She points out that on graduation the actors are supported not just in how they prepare for the work in the showcase but right down to the image they're presenting. Graduates are working in film, television and theatre and in

2011 John Bell, co-artistic director of Bell Shakespeare, auditioned the third year boys for the first time.

#### **4.5 QUT SUMMARY**

The acting training methodology at QUT is quite different from the other three schools surveyed in that a core methodology is taught, based on the work of Eric Morris. The work encourages a deep exploration of the actors personal life in order to create a lived emotional empathy referred to as the 'being state'. QUT is also very different from the other schools in that only three full time teaching staff are employed with sessional staff teaching movement, voice, script analysis and other subjects as required.

Productions are directed by staff from within the Acting department, and the Drama department, as well as by outside directors. The QUT BFA course sits within the much larger Drama department and is supported by the department in some academic subjects.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### VCA

#### 5.1 VCA BACKGROUND

The Victorian College of the Arts at Melbourne University established the School of Drama in 1975 to compliment the well-respected School of Art and School of Music. In 1979 the School of Dance was established and in 1992 the Swinburne Institute of Technology School of Film and Television moved to the VCA. The inaugural Dean of the School of Drama Peter Oyston (1975 to 1982) set up the school along very different principles to NIDA, being more interested in fostering ideas than developing skills.

My approach while I was Dean was to train people in ways of developing the alchemy to change a sense of identity into the celebration of it. It is possible, and we proved it through the theatre companies we helped establish. ...skills are there only to express ideas, they are not things in themselves. The ideas carry the real value, and because students have ideas we should nurture and promote them because they will be the future leaders in the arts.  
(Pascoe:2000)

Oyston was influenced mainly by the Stanislavsky technique and published papers and produced 'how to' videos on applying the technique to one's work. Oyston was succeeded by Roger Hodgman in 1983 and he in turn by David Latham in 1987. Hodgman moved the course to a more traditional program but still with an emphasis on performance making. Both Hodgman and Latham were influenced by Stanislavsky's work and particularly as understood by Mike Alfreds (2007).<sup>9</sup> Lindy Davies was Head of Drama from 1996 to 2007. Respected voice teacher Geraldine Cook is the current Head of Drama.

Davies developed a core curriculum titled *The Autonomous Actor* in which she articulated the vision and mission statement for the School of Drama:

The School of Drama is an international centre of theatre research, which is committed to the investigation of form, the development of

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<sup>9</sup> Mike Alfreds presents Stanislavsky in a very practical manner in his extensive memoir of directing theatre in America, Israel and the UK.

virtuosity, the attainment and mastery of skills and the expansion of the boundaries of all theatre disciplines. The School of Drama enhances and challenges the arts profession in order to provide alternatives, which advance the understanding and practice of the art form.  
(Davies 2000)

This vision is very different to that of the other three schools as it sets itself apart as a theatre research centre designed to grow new theatre forms and not to mould students to existing forms. Whilst Davies insists that the course as taught today is not her vision at all, Head of School Geraldine Cook acknowledges that the principles of the ‘autonomous actor’, as outlined by Davies, is still the main thrust of the training. Cook acknowledges that VCA is in a transitional stage but that the outcomes of the training have not changed. “The autonomy is really important because the imaginative world is really important. The autonomy to be able to immerse into that world and to give one’s self the time to immerse one’s self into that world is the core (of the training)” (Geraldine Cook interview, VCA Melbourne 17 May, 2011). VCA graduate Simon Stone is an example of the kind of theatre practitioner who is reinventing notions of presenting theatre. He is directing groundbreaking works for the Hayloft Project,<sup>10</sup> Melbourne Theatre Company, Sydney Theatre Company and Company B Belvoir. Many VCA graduates have gone on to create successful careers in theatre, film and television with Elizabeth Debicki winning the lead role in Baz Luhrmann’s film adaptation of *The Great Gatsby*.

## **5.2 KEY PERSONNEL**

In 1979 Lindy Davies took up the position of head of the acting degree during a time of uncertainty, when the administration was unsure of whether to develop a training ground for community theatre or to train actors for professional theatre. Davies believed she could achieve both through intense skills training particularly in voice and movement. Davies left the VCA for a period before returning in 1995 to hold the post of Head of the School of Drama until 2006. Richard Murphet was acting head of

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<sup>10</sup> The Hayloft Project is a Melbourne based theatre collective of mostly VCA graduates who are producing original works, often refashioned from the classic cannon.

course for one year until Tanya Gerstle, who had been teaching in the program since 1999, took over in 2007, first as acting Head of Acting and then as Senior Lecturer in Drama and undergraduate coordinator of the Acting program. Significant teachers interviewed from the period are Lindy Davies, Geraldine Cook, Tanya Gerstle, lecturer Melanie Beddie and voice teacher Tony Smith. Unfortunately I was unable to interview movement teacher Leisa Shelton. In 2011 Robert Walton from the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama was appointed full time lecturer in Acting. I have not interviewed him as he had not taught those students who graduated within the scope of this study.

### **5.3 BACKGROUND AND INFLUENCES OF KEY PERSONNEL**

#### **5.3.1 Lindy Davies - Head of VCA School of Drama 1995-2006**

To understand the development of Davies approach one needs to understand the complex journey that brought Davies to formulate her training methods. Davies has been obsessed with curriculum and the process of learning since studying education at Monash University in the mid 1960s. Davies was deeply involved in experimentation in theatre and in education, being a member of Melbourne's La Mama Experimental Theatre Company, formed in 1968, and taking on a lectureship in Developmental Drama at The Secondary Teachers College at the age of 21. La Mama was "keen to explore a theatre form that had nothing to do with English repertory theatre" (Lindy Davies interview Melbourne 28 May 2011), sourcing plays from the American journal, *The Drama Review (TDR)* that focused on "performances in their social, economic, aesthetic, and political contexts".<sup>11</sup> The company was influenced by the improvisational, collaborative approach practiced by Joseph Chaiken of The Open Theater, New York.

In fulfilling her University obligation to teach in schools Davies found herself teaching a class of 45 nine and ten year old children who mostly had the reading age of a five year old. She threw out the curriculum and played

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<sup>11</sup> Drama Review website <http://www.mitpressjournals.org/loi/dram>

drama games, with very positive results, beginning a new interest in empowering people and “enabling profound change through drama” (Davies interview 2011). The power of this role-play led her to the work of Brian Way and Dorothy Heathcote who were achieving similar results with children in Newcastle on Tyne. In 1971 Davies attended three theatre events that planted the seeds for a series of personal investigations: *Apocalypsis Cum Figuris* directed by Jerzy Grotowski, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* directed by Peter Brook, and Rex Cramphorn’s production of *The Tempest*. During this time she reflected on her own journey as an actor and found she was becoming disillusioned with the processes and outcomes at La Mama and increasingly excited by the transformations taking place in the children she was working with, the kind of transformation she wanted to create in herself.

Whilst travelling in Bali she witnessed the ‘trance state’ in performances presented in the indigenous theatre, similar to that reflected in the work of Brook, Grotowski and Cramphorn. She travelled to America and Europe where she studied with Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski, Jonathon Fox (who created playback theatre), and Kristen Linklater whom she found “inspiring and revelatory” (ibid.). Davies became a member of Peter Brook’s company in Paris, working with Yoshi Oida, who, at that time, was collaborating with Brook on *The Mahabharata*. In Paris she had an epiphany. While standing on the Gare du Nord watching people about her she realized that they were doing one of three things: standing still, running or walking. She felt “If I can get people to just simply walk without thinking of how or why they should walk or having any attention on walking - if I can just get people to be in the centre of those three actions that’s a great bridge from the work I’d been doing” (ibid.). Here the seed was planted for the impulse work she was to develop later. In Paris she was also introduced to Buddhism through a Buddhist monk working with the Brook Company.

Davies attained a Masters degree at New York University under Richard Schechner, artistic director of The Performance Group, (later called the Wooster Group), and assisted Schechner on his production of Seneca’s *Oedipus*. She was also introduced to the Peter Cass personalization work as

taught by Olympia Dukakis. Davies was well aware of the major influences in acting training in New York as taught at the various studios but she was not interested in the psychological. She had witnessed actors “breaking down” (ibid.) in acting and in voice classes and believed that this kind of teacher was “an egocentric, invested in their own gratification and self promotion” (ibid.). She was fiercely anti-guru as a result of a negative experience of working with Grotowski. She looked to all the mentors she had flourished under and could see that they all responded to the actors with ‘unconditional positive regard’, as coined by Carl Rogers.<sup>12</sup> She also looked to the meditative work she had experienced in Paris with the Buddhist monk, as a way of getting the actor into an egoless state from which they could be transformed.

### **5.3.2 Tanya Gerstle – Current Senior Lecturer in Drama (Acting) and undergraduate coordinator**

Gerstle, an actor and director, has worked both in mainstream theatre and producing her own work in Australia and internationally. Gerstle has taught at University of New South Wales, NIDA and University of Western Sydney and was co-artistic director of the Actor’s Centre in Sydney for two years. Gerstle came to VCA in 1999 and in that time has directed many of the student performances, taught as a senior lecturer and now as head of course. Gerstle has an Honours degree in Performance from UNSW and an MA in Direction from VCA, Melbourne University. Her eclectic training encompassed time spent apprenticing herself to different performance ensembles, including the early iteration of Anthill in Melbourne, the feminist collective Fools Gallery in Canberra, New Moon in Northern Queensland and experimental theatre collectives in Poland, Rome and Amsterdam. Her study included workshops with Roy Hart Theatre in France, Frankie Armstrong in the UK and the RADA summer school. Gerstle was not interested in solely putting on plays but was inspired by theatre of meaning, be it political or community, often combining both. Her performance work included Theatre in Education and Community Theatre

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<sup>12</sup> Carl Rogers, founder of humanistic Psychology  
<http://www.nrogers.com/carlrogersbio.html>



as well as commercial theatre. Her interest always remained in creating original work and in recent years she has worked with VCA graduates, developing works under the banner of her own company, Optic Nerve Performance Group.

### **5.3.3 Melanie Beddie – Lecturer in Acting**

At the time of interview Lecturer in Acting, Melanie Beddie was Acting Head of Drama whilst Gerstle was on leave. Beddie is a graduate of VCA, having studied under Roger Hodgman and David Latham. Beddie has had an extensive career as an actor and theatre maker, and as an actor trainer, forming the 5 Dollar Theatre Company with whom she generated sixteen new works in five years. She has performed for Melbourne Theatre Company on the main stage and in education and been resident dramaturg for MTC, Playbox and Playlist. She has directed at VCA, WAAPA, National Theatre School and the company she founded, The Branch. Prior to attending VCA Beddie attended Sydney University and in 2002 she co-founded the *Dramaturgies Forum* with Paul Monaghan and Peter Eckersal. In 2004 she received the Dramaturgy Fellowship from the Australia Council.

### **5.3.4 Tony Smith – Head of Voice**

The voice department is headed up by Tony Smith, with Head of School Geraldine Cook teaching part time supported by sessional staff member Carmen Lysiak. Smith's background is very interesting in that he has been taught by so many of the teachers from the other drama schools and, along with Lysiak, is a graduate of the NIDA voice studies course. Smith trained as an actor at the Darling Downs Institute of Advanced Education, now the University of Southern Queensland, under voice teacher Kate Foy. He later spent a year studying the Linklater technique under Linklater master teacher Dianne Eden, the head of the acting program at QUT. He went on to graduate from the one-year voice training program at NIDA under Linklater teacher Isobel Kirk. At NIDA he also studied under Betty Williams and claims that he learnt so much from the way Williams gave notes and her

skill in teaching accents. He came to VCA in 1998. When he took the position as Head of Voice he felt he was skilled at curriculum but not at delivering it. He believes being mentored by Lindy Davies assisted him in his development as a teacher. He is now a qualified Alexander Technique teacher and incorporates this work in all his classes as well as providing individual and group Alexander classes.

#### **5.4 METHODOLOGY AND COURSE STRUCTURE**

Since the amalgamation with Melbourne University in 2007, VCA has changed the entrance and retention guidelines. Pre 2007 there were up to thirty students accepted into first year with approximately five being dismissed at the end of first year and again at the end of second year. Under the new academic paradigm a student has the right to contest their dismissal and also has the right to repeat. Consequently only twenty-five students are now accepted into first year and all are supported to graduate.

On her appointment at VCA in 1979 Davies looked to the many and varied experiences from overseas to inform the philosophy of the program. She wasn't interested in just "doing plays" but rather was keen to develop "an actor who was classically virtuosic (and) could make new work" (Davies interview 2011), just like the "highly skilled actors who were fascinated by ideas" (ibid.) that she had worked with in Paris. This led her to develop her approach, *The Autonomous Actor*, in which actors would be encouraged to "develop their own internal evaluative mechanism" (ibid.). Davies wrote two courses, one for the actor/interpreter and one for the actor/creator.

The work was very different from that being taught at NIDA or WAAPA where the backbone of the teaching was based in Stanislavsky's actions and objectives, an approach that was "of little use" (ibid.) to Davies. "What worked for me was being centered, connected to my physical fluency and vocal fluency, being completely in the centre of the moment and being open to being changed by the language" (ibid.).

Davies' process worked from the intuitive to the rational rather than the dominant pedagogy of working from the rational to the intuitive. In the first year of training at VCA Davies focused on creating an atmosphere of permission, allowing the student to get in touch with their instincts in full awareness of their personal learning modalities. Davies took from the study of Neuro-linguistic Programming the use of the modalities of kinesthetic, visual and auditory in determining how a student processed learning. Davies adopted the psychological applications taken from transactional analysis, developed by Eric Burn, to enlighten students as to patterns of thinking that may be holding them back in their work and to encourage them to stay right minded at all times. Whilst having been drawn to Linklater's work Davies began to feel that the psychological aspect of the work resulted in encouraging actors to 'feel' excluding those who 'think'. In looking for an approach that would accommodate the different learning modalities of different actors, Davies took Linklater's notion of 'imaging' further by encouraging a kinesthetic idea of 'sensation pictures'. This involved 'dropping in' a word or thought and allowing an imagistic, associative, emotional or imaginative response to enliven that word or thought. Further modes of kinesthetic learning were sought from the Feldenkrais method bridging the gap between thought, action and the spoken word and so encouraging the actor to create a pathway to the word before it was spoken. In summary "in the first year of training the actor focused on breathing, impulse, active meditation and then found the impulse to speak" (ibid.).

Davies emphasized in our interview that the point of this work was to assist the actor in finding the impulse to speak rather than the actor making the decision to speak. Rather than learning lines the actor would refer to lines written out in tall letters up on a wall or on a power point projection. "The body can then remain open, relaxed and in touch with the breath, the words are then 'dropped in' to an 'empty well' and then the impulse to speak happens" (ibid.). There are three stages before the actor arrives at this final stage including connecting to the other actor with the words. Davies stresses that this is a long process and that only after hours of

graduated work can the actor really experience the difference between impulse and pre-meditation.

Davies believes her approach is “profoundly intuitive and not conceptual” (ibid.) and that she can only communicate it when she is in the mode of teaching. Whilst her work has been readily accepted in Europe, Davies feels she has had to fight for many years to have this female, organic work recognized in Australia. Most of her teachers were male and she felt that the patriarchal paradigm held the female notion of intuition as inferior to reason. It wasn’t until she met Kristen Linklater that she found an approach to the work that she could relate to: “feminine, soft, organic and open” (ibid.). Whilst Davies encourages an organic approach she is fiercely insistent on thorough investigation of the material at hand. She encourages detailed research of the social and historical context of the play and of the writer and detailed script analysis. She doesn’t encourage research that may determine the outcome from a rational process, as she believes the active interpretation only happens on the rehearsal room floor. Discoveries will be made about the character during the process, notated and slowly the inner life of the character will be built through an intuitive process. Davies believes that directors who work with VCA graduates trained under her are well aware that they are not practicing a ‘method’ but rather an approach that allows everyone to work in their individual way. She believes these graduates are not married to outcomes, but rather are comfortable working in the centre of the moment, so they can take direction well and are able to change their performance easily without taking directors notes personally.

Davies believes character is revealed through connection to the words and that if the actor is changed by the language they will also be changed physically.

All I’m doing is creating a space where the person can enter their imaginative world and the imaginative world is remarkable and I find what I need to do is to stay out of the way because I can get excited by what I see and make offers that create a pathway that’s not nearly as interesting as a pathway that’s happening when people are truly inspired, and people are truly inspired when they’re immersed in the meaning of the work and immersed in an imaginative landscape. People create awesome things.  
(ibid.)

Current Head of Drama, Geraldine Cook, commented that the school was focused on autonomy and the three principles of Davies work as implemented when Davies was Dean of the School, and that today it is clear that current VCA “teachers have been influenced by Lindy and have adapted and developed her work into their work” (Cook interview 2011). Gerstle concurs on having been influenced by Davies’ work and maintains that the curriculum booklet, *The Autonomous Actor*, is still the underpinning of what is taught at VCA, but is clear to point out that she doesn’t ‘do’ what Davies ‘did’. Davies invited like-minded Gerstle to join the VCA staff as it was important that all staff taught kinesthetically. Gerstle is of the opinion that any of the teachers who worked alongside Davies were influenced by her “philosophical and ethical approach” (Gerstle interview 2011). Gerstle holds that the aim of the VCA training is to see “if the instrument can respond instinctively and kinesthetically, at the same time as embedding technique unconsciously” (ibid.). Gerstle points out that the training starts with the mind and the process of moving into “creative endeavor” (ibid.) takes a long time. Essentially there are three subjects taught: acting, physical performance and voice. It’s interesting to note that none of the other schools refer to the movement component of the course as performance-making, but rather an adjunct subject that sits aside from the acting classes. Only at WAAPA was there a clear sense that movement was also an integrated element of the core acting teaching.

Under Gerstle the actors are learning to “internalize the director” (ibid.) by developing a rehearsal intelligence that allows them to work with directors of any approach. Much of what Gerstle explained in her interview with me was in line with how Davies explained her process and Gerstle used similar language such as: training the autonomous actor, using a kinesthetic process, connecting to language, connecting to space, language and relationship in abstract form and blueprinting this in the space. Gerstle believes that VCA graduates are very flexible in rehearsal, working equally as well with different directors, are good at making offers in the space and open to being affected by all the elements in the space as well as by the other actors. The point of difference from Davies’ work is that Gerstle does introduce Stanislavsky’s system of scene objectives and actions, but is clear

that only some actors will implement it as the actors are invited to work with whatever approach best suits their learning paradigm. Gerstle is careful not to introduce analysis until after the experience of a kinesthetic approach, as she feels the young actor may close down their options before having explored the possibilities of the moment. “Our process is about keeping it open for as long as possible so that it becomes something that you’ve not made an intellectual choice about” (ibid.).

Beddie believes the evolving VCA drama course is “not just about producing working actors but producing people who can imagine and have the skills to create new theatre practices in Australia – they might synthesize that from overseas or develop things from themselves” (Beddie, Interview VCA Melbourne 17 May, 2011).

According to Beddie, Kristy Edmunds, Deputy Dean and Head of Performing Arts for just one year in 2010, claimed that she was more interested in calling the department a school of theatre rather than a drama school, supporting Beddie’s view that the role of the VCA is to explore contemporary theatre practice (Beddie interview 2011). Beddie points to Simon Stone and other Hayloft Project Company members, all graduates of the acting degree, as those graduates who are proving very successful in creating new art forms. These graduates are the perfect example of those who “are really able to lead, to create new work, create new opportunities for themselves to earn money within existing models but also to expand those” (ibid.). Beddie is working within the new structure of the VCA in which devising work and creating work and working from the self are at the forefront. She claims there is still plenty of work on text and study of the canon but equally an emphasis on devised work.

The two threads complement each other – the focus on working from the self, creating work, understanding how work is made – it creates a theatrical imagination even if you want to be an interpretive actor and your skill is to work on film and TV- there’s nothing wrong with having explored some of these other ideas just as if you want to be a cutting edge theatre maker you need to be on top of Chekhov before you throw him out.  
(ibid.)

Beddie teaches across the three years, introducing the first year actors to a similar impulse exercise that Lindy Davies used. This exercise moves onto Greek text in order that the actors engage with language bigger than themselves, engaging and expanding the imagination. In second year she engages the students in character and transformation. Beddie is clear that the three stages of the training at VCA have grown out of Davies' process of training the autonomous actor. Firstly the actors research the world of the play in a performative way including a full understanding of the context of the writer and the context in which the play was written. The actors then internalize the text, referred to by Davies as "dropping in" in which the actor will engage "with each word of the text in an imaginative way that creates a pool of ideas and images – it's about seeking out the images in the text and discovering the world and the character through the text" (ibid.). At the same time Beddie will encourage the actors to work off impulse, letting go of the need to make decisions about what they're doing prior to investigation in the space. The second layer involves externalizing the text. Beddie is clear that this work has grown out of Davies' work but is not Davies' work. The actors start "to endow the space, objects and other people as the parts of their imaginative world - working on fragments of text - one line or one image - they might work with the idea of what a father or mother is in the context of that character" (ibid.). She elaborated:

It's vast work and asking inexperienced people to connect to the idea of a young girl sacrificing herself for the good of Greece you'll get something that's akin to a high school performance - but when you get work that activates the imagination and the image and the abstract you get something that's grander and epic in size.  
(ibid.)

And similar to Davies' notion of following instinct prior to the rational, Beddie will lastly introduce script analysis by going back to the table to make notes and mark out beats and changes in the script. The work is then shaped over a week period in order to make sense for an audience.

Other work in first year includes working with Leisa Shelton and the amateur students to make short pieces, usually based on a myth or a fairy tale. The students also present a solo piece that reflects their ability to use material from themselves. The first year actors are also exposed to

Chekhov and in this work they will move to the 'blueprinting' stage much more quickly. The year ends with a scene study class using Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. Beddie, like Davies does not introduce the actors to the psychological work of actions and objectives as she believes it confuses them with the imaginative abstract work that opens them up to unexpected responses.

In second year the actors will be exposed to dramatic structure and scene intention but in a loose way still encouraging the actor to steer clear of decisions prior to discovering moments through impulse. Beddie intends to bring action and objective work into the second year curriculum in the future. Beddie believes the voice work is integrated into the acting work as the voice teacher will talk about breath, release and image much the same way as she will in her class. Whilst the students are introduced to a certain approach to working it is ultimately expected that each student will develop their own methodology. Physical methodologies introduced in first year include Le Coq, Laban and Viewpoints. All along the students are "expected to reach a pretty sophisticated level autonomously" (ibid.). Outside directors who come in to work with the students will still be encouraged to put the actor experience at the centre of the work. In years gone by this included not predetermining design choices until the ensemble had made discoveries. This model has since become unworkable and there is more emphasis on sustainable models of production to suit the technical and design students.

VCA has chosen not to produce a graduation show reel for the last few years but the students are exposed to screen work in the third year. They do an exercise with the ABC, and NIDA graduate Danielle Carter conducts a screen workshop with them. Students also participate in the film school student films. Whilst students are always asking for more screen work Beddie believes that if they are taught well it will translate to the screen as well as stage, supporting this assertion by pointing out the amount of screen work the actors are involved in on graduation.



Beddie believes that a “VCA graduate stands apart from other graduates in their ability to adapt to many different styles with great imagination, instigating ideas and contributing generously to a process, their ability to generate their own work but just as easily fit into the State Theatre model and their ability to engage in artistic dialogue. They will also have responsive bodies and voices that are able to work kinesthetically in order to produce authenticity” (ibid.). Beddie, like many of the acting teachers from each of the schools, believes that three years training is not enough and wonders if the actors are industry ready on graduation. She does believe that the VCA graduates leave with an appetite for more learning and are therefore able to continue their development in a professional setting. Due to the autonomous nature of the acting course many graduates move into directing as well.

Tony Smith named the Linklater voice work, the Alexander technique as well as the language work of Cicely Berry and Betty Williams as the biggest influences on his teaching. He pointed out that Betty Williams had such a fine ear for language, articulation and muscularity and particular speech signatures. Smith is clear that all the staff in the acting department share a common philosophy in that breath is most important and “share a common ethos of performance and being performative” (Tony Smith Interview, VCA, 17 May 2011). In terms of the fundamentals of training they are all looking to achieve “well coordinated, well organized bodies both in terms of movement and voice” (ibid.).

Smith believes his teaching method has changed since becoming an Alexander Technique teacher. He no longer teaches any one thing in isolation, never separating voice from physical activity, enabling him to teach the ‘whole’ person. He no longer gives specific exercises for specific outcomes. For example he doesn’t give exercises to create a resonant voice because he believes the actor has to make the decision to be heard. He believes the brain organizes the body according to intention and so the actor doesn’t have to ‘do’ anything but rather just have a clear ‘intention’. The Alexander work has influenced the way he approaches breath capacity. Rather than doing exercises to increase lung capacity he will focus first on

freeing the ribs and strengthening the body and then the student can do exercises increasing the count of the breath. He believes that by teaching voice in a balanced way, connected to the whole body, he is now able to relieve tensions throughout the body where as in the past he would have replaced one tension with another. He believes that the main reason he is a better teacher now is that earlier in his career he taught what he had been taught without really understanding why he was teaching it. As a result he has thrown away a lot of the dogma from these teachers and now trusts his ability to read what the student presents him with.

He believes the strength of the VCA graduate “is their ability to work autonomously, the ability to read widely around the subject they are engaged with, their awareness of their place in the greater mise-en-scène, their enjoyment of working in an ensemble and their ability to make something beautiful out of nothing” (ibid.). Smith is conscious, as are the other staff members, of treating the actors as artists and that is how they enter the industry. In line with the ethos of discovery in the school, Smith enters each class in a spirit of investigation and is always keen to include the students in this discovery.

## **5.5 VCA SUMMARY**

The training at VCA, as understood today, was modeled on *The Autonomous Actor*, a curriculum for training written by Lindy Davies. Even after Davies departure as Head of Drama in 2007, the principles of this document remained. The focus was on training theatre artists who were highly skilled vocally, physically and imaginatively and who were instigators in creating and developing new theatre forms. Stanislavsky has only recently been introduced as Davies was more interested in the discovery of sense and meaning from working on the floor rather than predetermining meaning in an intellectual pursuit.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **WAAPA**

#### **6.1 WAAPA BACKGROUND**

In 1980 Geoff Gibbs was assigned the task of establishing the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts within the campus of what is now the Edith Cowan University at the Mt Lawley campus (formerly Mt Lawley Teachers College) in Perth. An Australian who had studied in the USA, Gibbs brought a dynamic group of practitioners to WAAPA to head up each department. In 1981 the Dance course was established followed in 1982 by the Acting course and subsequently by courses in musical theatre, theatre design, lighting design, costume, props and scenery, music, opera, Aboriginal studies and film-making. Nigel Rideout, formerly the head of the The London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art (LAMDA), was elected the first Head of Acting in 1981. Subsequent heads of acting were the esteemed theatre director and teacher Arne Neeme, Lyall Jones, Dean Carey and Chris Edmund, and as senior acting teacher the former artistic director of Melbourne Theatre Company Simon Phillips. Amongst the successful alumni are Hugh Jackman, Frances O'Connor, Marcus Graham, Rachael Maza, Dominic Purcell, William McInnes and Ditch Davey.

#### **6.2 KEY PERSONNEL**

Associate Professor Andrew Lewis is the Program Director of all the performance courses, including Acting, at WAAPA. Chris Edmund is the Course Co-coordinator of the acting department, with Angela Punch-McGregor as Head of Acting. Julia Moody is Head of Voice, Donald Woodburn is full time voice teacher and Lisa Scott-Murphy was Head of Movement up until 2012. At the time of the publication of this paper, Chris Edmund had just retired, due to leave his post at the end of 2013.

## **6.3 BACKGROUND AND INFLUENCES OF KEY PERSONNEL**

### **6.3.1 Associate Professor Andrew Lewis - Program Director**

Andrew Lewis trained as an actor in Scotland, studied directing at WAAPA, achieved a Masters in Performance Studies at UNSW and went on to the Australian Film and Television School to study television directing. He runs the screen academy at WAAPA as well as overseeing all the performance courses. He teaches and directs in the acting department as well as overseeing the course structure. Whilst his original acting training was Stanislavsky based, Lewis is open to exploring current developments and now uses the Ivana Chubbick approach in his screen class. He continues to work in the industry as a television and theatre director and as an actor and has written and co-written several plays and screenplays.

### **6.3.2 Chris Edmund – Head of Acting**

Chris Edmund trained as an actor at Rose Bruford in the UK and went on to direct ‘on the job’ working as associate director for a regional British company. He went on to direct in fringe companies in London and at Rose Bruford and the Drama Centre. He met WAAPA founding Head of Acting, Nigel Rideout, at the Berkeley, California campus of the Drama Centre. Rideout invited Edmund to come to WAAPA to direct and a few years later he returned as Head of Directing in 1987. In 2002 he became head of the acting program.

Having not been taught Stanislavsky’s system as a student at Rose Bruford he came to this work through Max Stafford Clarke and has gone on to use a lot of Stanislavsky’s original exercises such as the Bearer Bond exercise. Edmund encourages an eclectic training rather than being doctrinaire. He has an on going fascination with training systems in Europe and has established a cultural exchange with the Paris Conservatoire, the St Petersburg Academy and the Moscow Art Theatre School. It would be true to say that his influences are predominately European. He is pedantic

about structure and punctuation and cites Bill Gaskill<sup>13</sup> as a great influence not only in his philosophy about theatre but also in terms of his political standing. This strong sense of equality for all is reflected in the culture at WAAPA where actors are encouraged to focus on the work at hand rather than be self-interested. From my time teaching and directing at WAAPA I was very aware of a mutual respect actor for teacher and teacher for actor.

### **6.3.3 Angela Punch-McGregor – Senior Acting Teacher**

Angela Punch-McGregor became the Head of Acting in 2006, replacing esteemed Australian actor Gillian Jones. Punch-McGregor is a NIDA trained actor, having gone straight from school into the new three-year acting at the age of 17, and has many years experience as a leading lady on stage and in film. The Head of Acting at NIDA during her time was Aubrey Mellor and she cites Mellor as having had a great influence on her:

In the rehearsal room it was safe, I felt I was watched very carefully and was appreciated with great generosity and under that I flourished. Aubrey had a fundamental philosophy to celebrate what he's watching and danced with the artist so well.  
(Punch-McGregor, interview WAAPA 17 June 2011)

Punch-McGregor's approach to her work has changed over the years as a result of her own self-development. She believes it was her good fortune to be married to a man whose philosophy on acting she is very much in tune with, and who she regards as a fundamentally creative person, has meant that she has always been able to live her work 24 hours a day. The process of reflection that this intimate relationship has encouraged has meant that she has always questioned her own work and as a result she believes the creative process has always flourished. She cites Declan Donnelan<sup>14</sup> as her greatest influence, stating "Declan Donnelan's book is the most seminal work since Stanislavsky- it's come on top of Stanislavsky and the derivative teachers from America" (ibid.).

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<sup>13</sup> Bill Gaskill was artistic director of the Royal Court from 1965- 1972 and was a founding member of the Joint Stock company.

<sup>14</sup> British director Declan Donnelan is co-founder of Cheek by Jowl and directs in English, Russian and French. His book, *The Actor and the Target*, was published in 2002 by Nick Hern Books, London.

She is not a great admirer of action, objective and super objectives as she believes you can't play an action as they "are intellectual byproducts that you can't play in the moment" (ibid.). She believes that today we are quicker at grabbing on to ideas and know how to adopt things in a different way to how Stanislavsky was interpreting his work. Punch-McGregor believes that ultimately acting is the ability to shed the ego, "As an amateur Buddhist I find the correlation between human evolvment, spiritual evolvment and consciousness, is also the same philosophy- that the intrusion of the neurotic ego brings our behavior down and it brings the acting work down too" (ibid.).

#### **6.3.4 Lisa Scott-Murphy – Head of Movement**

Lisa Scott-Murphy came to WAAPA as Head of Movement in 1992. Scott-Murphy began her career as a mime and clown and on seeing Peter Brook's production, *Conference of the Birds*, she was inspired to move to Paris to further her training. She studied in Paris with Philippe Gaulier, Monika Pagneux and Yoshi Oida and was a member of a company of thirteen actors, speaking eight languages amongst them, formed by Brook company member, Yoshi Oida. The training was tough but made Scott-Murphy autonomous in her work and gave her a strong visual aesthetic. With Monika Pagneux, another Brook company member, she trained in a movement pedagogy influenced by mime, modern dance, the Feldenkrais method and the Alexander technique. This was the first time Scott-Murphy witnessed movement that related intelligently to how people think and how thoughts move through the body. This experience inspired Scott-Murphy to study the Feldenkrais method.

On her return to Australia she worked as movement consultant with the Sydney Theatre Company, the Griffin Theatre Company and taught at the Actors Centre. At WAAPA Scott-Murphy teaches across all three years. She believes she "graduates resourceful evocative actors who are good to work with" (Lisa Scott-Murphy interview WAAPA 17 June 2011). Her focus is "to restore every-one's movement to the most balanced, well organized so that any movement can be free of habit, free from all limitations" (ibid.).

### **6.3.5 Julia Moody - Head of Voice**

Julia Moody was trained as an actor and worked professionally for twenty years. She received a BA in acting from the Western Australia University of Technology, now Curtin University, with a double major in film and television acting. She completed a one-year post graduate course in acting at the Bristol Old Vic. On her return to Australia she performed extensively in theatre including a time with the Melbourne Theatre Company. She completed the one-year voice studies course at NIDA in 1992 under the tutelage of Kristen Linklater trained teacher, Isobel Kirk. She was seconded to VCA where she worked for a brief time before becoming the first voice teacher at the University of Ballarat. In 1995 she accepted the position as voice teacher at WAAPA.

Moody felt that whilst she learnt a lot about voice in her NIDA training she didn't learn enough about teaching voice and that has been an on going investigation for her. She continued her own training in 2002 by becoming an associate teacher in the Catherine Fitzmaurice technique. Moody feels that breath is the foundation of good voice work, both the physiological and psychological effect of breath on the performance. "Being in the moment is being responsive and comfortable with the breath and if not it'll effect your articulation, delivery, sensibility, your flow" (Julia Moody interview WAAPA 17 June 2011).

The Fitzmaurice work has had a big influence on Moody's approach. Whilst Fitzmaurice is a contemporary of Rodenberg and Berry with very similar practices, the difference is the incorporation of 'tremoring', which engages the autonomic nervous system and encourages the body to tremor. "Tremoring allows a response from the autonomic nervous system which then affects the central nervous system so you have a different sort of vitality and sensibility that's developed" (ibid.). Moody assesses each student from the Discovery Play project at the beginning of first year, determines if they have any injuries and also has them assessed by the Speech Pathology students.

### **6.3.6 Donald Woodburn – Voice Teacher**

Like Moody, South African born Donald Woodburn also studied voice at NIDA but under Bill Pepper and has spent many years teaching and coaching in South Africa prior to his 2010 appointment at WAAPA. Whilst he has fitted into the structure that was already in place at WAAPA he believes that his approach is quite different due to his time spent working in a third world country, often working with languages other than English. He spent time both at South African Broadcast as a coach and as voice teacher at the South African School of Film Television and Dramatic Art, AFDA. “My principle is that everything we say is second hand – we repeat what we’ve read and heard- by the time we speak it we’ve thought it and felt it – so we say what we’re thinking - the voice spills out of an experience rather than determining the experience” (Donald Woodburn interview WAAPA 17 June 2011). Consequently he is very interested in how text changes depending on the context in which it’s spoken and the way it is being heard. This approach puts less emphasis on teaching to a desired outcome of sound. He likes to ‘rough up’ the language and encourages self awareness of vocal practices. He is against the idea of serving an outcome model and is keen for actors to see text not as stripes of patterns on the page but as pictures:

You look at the words and see what pictures come to mind - go back and think about the pictures and the emotional response to the pictures and now see if you can remember the words in relationship to the pictures.  
(ibid.)

He is also interested in “measurable geography” by putting “the place in the play in an exact location relevant to where you are anchors the vocal confidence” (ibid.). He believes that the actor’s body will respond physically to the location of a thought and the voice will respond accordingly.

Woodburn is responsible for all the first year warm ups. He cites Bill Pepper as his major influence especially in terms of the text work. In turn Pepper was most influenced by the work of Cicely Berry, Kristen Linklater and Patsy Rodenberg. Woodburn has investigated Arthur Lessac’s work but



found it difficult to gel with. He has been influenced also by the African physical aesthetic. After growing up on a farm in South Africa and teaching so many black actors he has been struck by the relationship between the voice and the body:

The physical engagement of the body in voice production means there is a permanent moving and shifting which keeps the centre of gravity low and the quality of the voice rich. A low centre of gravity will assist the actor in having no upper body tension that is often responsible for so many vocal issues.  
(ibid.)

As a result of this work he spends a lot of time in his classes encouraging lower centre of gravity by building strength of support in the thighs and glutes. Woodburn believes that specific to WAAPA training is the predominant use of classic text over contemporary text in the voice classes. Woodburn also commented on the collegial nature of the working environment at WAAPA.

#### **6.4 METHODOLOGY AND COURSE STRUCTURE**

Each year WAAPA takes eighteen actors and commits to those for the full duration of the course, with expulsion needing a very good reason. These actors are taught in one group making the class size larger than at NIDA, where they are divided into two groups of twelve. Punch-McGregor spoke of the need to make sure the actors in first year feel safe both in the institution and in the group. As a way of assisting this transition, the first year actors present their audition pieces to the rest of school. This WAAPA tradition allows the older colleagues to enthusiastically welcome the new students into the school. The first exercise in first year is the discovery play,<sup>15</sup> where all the actors are thrown into a loosely directed Shakespeare play, directed by one of the full time staff. This production, designed to show up the actor's strengths and weaknesses, identifying each student's blocks, is viewed and assessed by the WAAPA staff only. From these assessments each staff member will have a clear idea of where each actor

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<sup>15</sup> This exercise was devised by Michel Saint-Denis, the founder of the English conservatoire model of acting training.

needs to develop over the next three years. The director interferes little with the actor's process so they can reveal exactly what their strengths and limitations are. The actors reflect on their own problems and can then take responsibility for their own progress. The concept of reflection is instilled early in the training and can be seen as a very powerful tool in the development of these actors. "First year is about making the young training actor aware of their limitations and their unconscious vocal and physical habits that might be impeding the work, and helping them to monitor (those) for themselves and deconstructing them" (Punch-McGregor interview 2011).

The first year is made up of classes in the morning, including voice, movement, script analysis, history of theatre, acting methodology, singing and improvisation. These classes continue in second and third year. WAAPA is the only school to maintain technique classes throughout all of third year. Staff remain very aware of each other's progress with students and there is some co-teaching. Sessional staff teach improvisation, Le Coq based movement, physical observation and character work. Angela Punch-McGregor and Chris Edmund teach most of the acting classes with Punch-McGregor and Andrew Lewis teaching screen acting. Punch-McGregor is mostly responsible for the first year acting classes and will spend a three-hour class each week on "basic methodology on what the imagination can do" noting that in "this particular time in the world the young persons imagination is gone" (ibid.). Her approach will include exercises focused on the mind's eye, the senses, what's coming in through the senses; focus work, status and stakes. She will employ a psychological model employing the fundamentals of transactional analysis.<sup>16</sup> Each student will research a

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<sup>16</sup> "Transactional analysis (TA) is a therapeutic approach that emphasizes the ritualistic transactions of interactions and behaviors that occur between individuals. Developed by Eric Berne in the 1950s, TA focuses on social interaction, emotional well-being, and responsibility, involving life scripts that people develop based upon early childhood experiences. TA is an understandable, sophisticated structural analysis of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors." Szirony in Leong, 2008

particular acting methodology and present that to the class. In the second semester they will look at how to deliver a third party text in performing a verbatim theatre text as well as a self devised piece. They will also be exposed to story structure, the traditional well-made play, examining the climax, exposition of character and resolution. Projects in first year will include toddler week, led by Lisa Scott-Murphy, where the actors will spend a week studying the physical and emotional world of toddlers and experience embodying that research. In second year they will be exposed to classical texts with emphasis on approach and process. Whilst the methodology used is not prescriptive the staff will be making sure the actor doesn't miss what's available to them.

In first year the actors perform a verbatim piece and work on a self-devised project in which they will write their own scene. The WAAPA production schedule has six production slots each year. In first year there will be an in-house end of year performance. In second year the actors will be in five plays and one screen project. In third year each actor will perform in four plays and in one screen project. The screen project involves three actors, giving each actor a significant role. Over the three years each actor will perform in ten plays and in two significant screen projects in addition to screen performance workshops in which they are encouraged to create their own work. Each actor will work with six different theatre directors and will possibly be directed by two in-house directors twice. Directors are either local professionals or hired from the East Coast. It's a core belief in the training at WAAPA that significant learning takes place in the process of production. The frustration for directors and actors alike is that the rehearsal hours are limited as the actors are involved in classes each morning. However, the advantage is that these actors learn to work economically on their feet, not wasting any time, and are strengthening their skills in the morning classes. Screen acting is taught in the film studio where each actor is well versed in using the equipment. Since the studio has been on line there has been a phenomenal improvement in the standard of work and a huge improvement in the response to the class. Angela Punch-McGregor notes that WAAPA is training actors for the reality

of the profession and as she has worked extensively in theatre, film and television she is very aware of what those professional expectations are.

In the first year of training Lisa Scott-Murphy provides another entry point into the work by encouraging the actors to be moved by ideas and to connect physically to language as well as focusing on balance as understood within the Feldenkrais method. The students become aware of their own gait and learn to abstract that. They study a detailed intensive on animal transformations and explore other ways into physical characterization such as spirit dances, mask, examining the theatricality of gesture and stick work. She finds that actors look back and realize how useful the work is. This first-year work is complemented by other teachers teaching dance, aikido and acrobatics.

In second year her work expands to include teaching rehearsal strategies in which she will show the actor how to flesh out the directors notes with exercises to do outside of rehearsal, aimed at enriching the work. The second-year movement classes are supplemented by sessional staff teaching dance and fencing. Scott-Murphy's work is more of an acting class than a movement class as she explores the physicality of text, plays with the stakes of the scene and explores the physicality of high passion. Her work is designed to encourage the physical expression of ideas, images and character. Whilst the focus in second year is on the technical aspects of movement, in the third year the focus shifts into a more creative endeavour. In third year they will explore the Michael Chekhov psychological gesture exercise. There is a close relationship between Scott-Murphy's work and the voice work especially in relation to connection to breath and vibration.

Julia Moody teaches the first year actors four warm ups and they are encouraged to be autonomous around this vocal preparation. Moody encourages a lot of singing in the voice work and often works with the musical theatre students together with the acting students to encourage the concept that voice and singing are the same. Also in first year the actors will explore protest songs, Greek chorus work and political speeches. Moody will also take the actors to many theatres in Perth so they can do acoustic

testing in the different spaces. Focus in first year is on breath and alignment informed by the Alexander technique, Patsy Rodenberg, Barbara Houseman, Cicely Berry and Kristen Linklater. First year also includes one hour of weekly speech pathology in which they study anatomy and phonetics, a weekly voice tutorial, with herself or Donald Woodburn, plus several written assignments comparing the approaches of different voice teachers. From her perspective the desired outcomes for each actor are:

A healthy voice that's not damaged and that they know how to keep themselves healthy throughout a (production) season and in all media; that the actors have tools for breaking down text and a strong facility with dialect; voice over skills; will have tools for approaching any situation and would have the wherewithal as to where to find the help needed.  
(ibid.)

Moody is very aware that training can encourage the actor to over work the language, and is keen that the actor makes the text their own. She will encourage the student's own idiolect rather than insisting the student adopt a sound that is not true to themselves. The desire is not to have every-one sounding the same.

She always refers to the actors as artists and encourages them to write a journal to determine how the individual artist learns:

I loathe therapy and want to develop the awareness for the actor – the autonomous performer who can sense what's happening for themselves.  
(ibid.)

This notion is reflected in the philosophy of the school as a whole:

the main tenet at WAAPA is generosity and company spirit and flow- it's not about you becoming a star, it's about you serving the work you're doing at that time. The staff agree to disagree which is a healthy way of working.  
(ibid.)

Moody still performs and believes it's very important for her to maintain the attitude of a practitioner teacher rather than that of a career teacher.

The WAAPA graduate would have had extensive character transformation work including the animal observation and infants exercise lead by Scott-

Murphy as well as the astute observation work of Mike Leigh as taught by Chris Edmund. Edmund is heavily influenced by Leigh describing his work as “improvised play structured around obsessive investigation of reality leading into intense character observation” (Edmund interview WAAPA 17 June 2011).

## **6.5 WAAPA SUMMARY**

The training at WAAPA is characterized by the more traditional approaches of Stanislavskian objective/action analysis and physical characterization combined with the non-linear approaches of Brook company master teachers, as taught by Scott-Murphy, and the ‘targeting’ philosophy of Declan Donnellan, as taught by Punch-McGregor. Contemporary derivations of Stanislavsky’s approach such as that formulated by Ivana Chubbick are implemented in the screen acting classes. The psychological tool of transactional analysis is implemented, with new approaches being introduced as a result of international exchanges. WAAPA has an integrated physical and vocal training with skills classes continuing into third year. Voice classes are rigorous with emphasis on retaining the actor’s authentic voice. WAAPA recognizes the value of learning in production as well as learning in the class setting, supporting the program of classes throughout the three years with a total of ten productions, including two screen projects, throughout a student’s time at WAAPA. There is a strong emphasis on screen performance supported by the WAAPA screen academy.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

### **INDUSTRY RESPONSE**

#### **7.1 INTRODUCTION**

In order to measure the efficacy of the training at each institution in the context of employment, I interviewed some of the most influential casting directors, actor agents and theatre directors in the country. I acknowledge that these industry leaders may not represent all those in a position of employing actors. Nor does it represent those in ensemble based theatre practice who may be instigating work, financed through funding bodies. It does however represent a strong component of the on-screen employment options and a diverse group of theatre directors sympathetic to a broad cross-section of theatrical movements.

I was keen to determine: if there were particular characteristics that could be attributed to graduates of each school; what industry expectations of graduates were; and if there were areas in which each school was performing well or could improve. I determined that it would be more beneficial to interview the casting directors and agents rather than film and television directors as these directors are not as aware of the training background of actors they may be working with. The casting directors and agents also have much greater exposure to a greater number of graduates and witness the ongoing development of these graduates, years after they leave the institution. The six casting directors interviewed are well-established, based in Sydney and Melbourne, and cast art films, commercial American blockbusters, quality television series, television serials and television commercials. I also interviewed two agents both representing 'A' list actors as well as emerging actors. The ten theatre directors include established directors, some of the new wave of younger directors working for the major companies, and several artistic directors of State Theatre Companies, both past and present.

It would have been beneficial to determine which graduates are the most employed and had I had a better response to the graduate questionnaire I may have been able to come to some conclusions. I have not looked at any data that each school may have on graduate employment, nor have I looked to recent film, television and theatre cast lists to determine which group is the most highly represented. This would indeed be a worthwhile audit for future research.

Appendix four and five detail the area of expertise of those interviewed but to encourage an open dialogue it was important that each industry leader remain anonymous. Although there were guiding questions, the research method used was the semi-structured interview. I have divided these responses into comments on each school in order to give an overview of the industry perception of the training of each institution. The agents and casting directors' responses are presented first, followed by the theatre directors' responses.

## **7.2 RESPONSE FROM CASTING DIRECTORS AND AGENTS**

### **7.2.1 NIDA**

There was general agreement among the casting directors (CD1, CD2, CD3) that NIDA graduates exhibited a high level of professionalism with several commenting on how important this is particularly when casting an actor who may never have worked in film or television before. CD1, CD2, and CD3 also uniformly agreed that NIDA actors were consistently castable and that casting directors had come to expect a consistency in a NIDA graduate's level of preparedness. The agents both agreed that NIDA graduates were highly skilled for theatre in particular and commented positively on their confidence (although A1 noted there was a fine line between arrogance and confidence). The agents both commented that most of the graduates work will be in film and television and that, whilst traditionally NIDA graduates were very poorly prepared for screen tests, this was now improving with one casting director (CD1) noting that there was a massive improvement in the last four years. CD1 also commented that you



were more likely to find the strong classical actress from within NIDA graduates.

When asked to consider areas that concerned them or that they would like to see improved, CD1 noted that graduates of the last 10 years seemed to have been mostly middle class and well-spoken as if NIDA had tried to supply the industry with a more commercial look. However, this was not helping the casting director to cast working class and ethnic roles. CD2 appreciated their skill level but felt that often a NIDA graduate would over-prepare for a screen test and thus compromise flexibility when working with the director. A2 commented that NIDA graduates, though very skilled, tend to have an attitude of entitlement that can make them very difficult to work with and, on this basis, she would prefer to represent a WAAPA or QUT graduate. She said it takes her about five years to knock the NIDA out of the NIDA graduate. CD4 agrees, finding them “too theatrical” and with a sameness about them: “It takes quite a few years for them to find themselves again and bring that to their performances... sometimes it happens earlier with some of the students, but rarely do I get excited by a NIDA student in recent years” (CD4).

CD1, CD2, and CD3 noted that some NIDA graduates were reluctant to test for certain television roles seeing them as beneath them although often that same actor would be very keen to test for a similar role a year later. There was a feeling amongst all the casting directors that there is too much emphasis on being seen by the industry whilst studying at NIDA and that made it difficult for the actor to really develop. A2 pointed out that they’re already involved in the social life and gossip of the industry before they graduate so they’ve sort of already lost their innocence. There was acknowledgement that many of the graduates are keen to go to Los Angeles and seem to have little interest in the local scene (CD1, CD2, CD3).

### **7.2.2 QUT**

The QUT graduates were known to the Sydney casting directors and agents but not at all to those in Melbourne, therefore only five interviews are

relevant to this section. A2 said that like the WAAPA graduates she found QUT graduates to be lovely, open people you want to work with and she would place QUT below WAAPA and above NIDA in her preference for representation. She felt the QUT graduates had improved a lot over the last six years and even though the standard was not even there were always one or two who are on par with the best graduates from the other schools. She felt that the graduates presented themselves as open, attractive people who have fun and were well balanced in terms of their careers, giving them a relaxed energy. She felt the training was serving them well and that the high production level of their show reel gives them an advantage in terms of on set experience. She also felt that some of the most interesting graduates over the last few years had come out of QUT.

This response was not shared by others: CD1 felt very strongly that QUT actors were lacking in skills saying “Even though the students have more time in front of the camera their general basic skills just aren’t as developed as other grads”. CD1 also felt that QUT graduates have “an unpredictability about them” that can either be wonderful or can undermine them in the audition room and on the floor. On the other hand, CD3 said that she sometimes found that unpredictability from a QUT graduate to be more engaging than a more measured performance that you may get from a NIDA graduate. CD1 however felt this ‘state’ often managed the actor rather than them managing it. She also suggested that directors don’t respond to that unpredictability as it makes the actor look too raw and unprepared to take on the role and she would like to see this addressed in the QUT training. CD1 and CD2 made note of the lack of audition technique in QUT graduates and the inability of knowing how to pitch their performance.

### **7.2.3 VCA**

All the casting directors and agents commented that VCA is better known for training theatre actors than screen actors. Several (CD1, CD4, CD5, CD6) commented on the strength of that theatre training in that the graduates were inventive and capable of creating their own work that was often ground breaking and artistically successful. The agreed opinion of all

the casting directors and agents was, however, that VCA students needed more on screen training and that the graduates were particularly ill prepared for the audition process. One Sydney casting director (CD1) who had tested all the recent female graduates was impressed with the preparedness of the actors but felt they were nervous and obviously not used to being in front of the camera. She found the lack of screen training surprising given there is so much screen work coming out of Melbourne. It should be noted that CD6 felt there was not much difference between the VCA graduates and others, acknowledging that all the schools could do more on screen training and also acknowledging that WAAPA was producing much stronger film actors.

CD1 felt that graduates were seriously disadvantaged by VCA not presenting a show reel in recent years. A1 was wary of VCA graduates in that she felt they often looked down at television work and seemed to have no knowledge of 'on set' behavior and protocol. She expressed concern at the lack of collaboration between the film school and the acting students at the VCA. Most agreed that the standard had dropped at VCA over the last five years and several pointed out that there were a few very strong years during the time that Lindy Davies was Head of School. CD5 was frustrated with the unevenness in the standard of the graduates, which she thought was better 20 years ago. She felt that as VCA was the premiere training school in Melbourne the graduates should be at the top of their game. Whilst there seemed to be a lack of consistent strength appropriate for screen work in the VCA graduates it was generally agreed there had been many outstanding graduates over the years.

### **7.2.3 WAAPA**

Every casting director and every agent spoke very highly of WAAPA graduates and several (A2, CD4, CD5) put WAAPA above NIDA as the school they were most likely to recommend to potential students, CD1 putting WAAPA on par with NIDA. Comments included "Graduates are lovely open people you want to work with" (CD5) and "The actors aren't caught up with the Sydney gossip or the scene- just get on with the work and they graduate

really delightful actors” (A2); “Very well prepared and possibly one of the best- really good theatre training” (A1). They all commented on the likeability of the actors, saying there was a freshness, a naivety and a willingness to learn, with A2 pointing out that they were confident but not cocky. CD5 said her allegiance was to WAAPA as they were “a great support to their students and have a history of a strong community which is almost opposite at NIDA”. Most commented that they felt the distance of WAAPA from the industry centre in Sydney and Melbourne was a distinct advantage and that even though WAAPA was on the other side of the continent many of the teachers were still active in the industry. This was very apparent in the very high quality of the show reel, which, though sometimes over produced, was a very strong asset to the graduate.

All of those interviewed talked not just about the level of skill being very impressive but also the clear sense of personal strength in the graduate. CD5 said she found a “more polished performer coming from WAAPA, not only in terms of their skills but on a personal level”. A WAAPA graduate seemed to be more genuine and CD1 said that the level of talent was “enjoyable”. In terms of preparedness for screen tests the WAAPA graduates were very strong. Several commented on the good etiquette of WAAPA graduates who were not only well prepared for the work but knew how to conduct themselves in the casting situation and on set. CD1 said that the WAAPA graduates were “down to earth” and that WAAPA had been ahead of NIDA in terms of on screen training for years. CD5 said she was always aware of how diligent the WAAPA teachers were in adding to their own skills by attending acting master classes and travelling overseas to broaden their knowledge base. Three of the casting directors (CD4, CD5, CD6) praised Andrew Lewis directly for the high quality of the show reel and the apparent ease that the actors have in front of the camera. Where NIDA had been criticized for lack of diversity in the cohort WAAPA was commended for a good diversity. One leading Sydney casting director (CD1) said that at one stage the strongest graduates were coming out of WAAPA and she feels WAAPA just gets stronger every year.

### **7.3 WHAT THE CASTING DIRECTORS AND AGENTS ARE LOOKING FOR**

I asked the casting directors and the agents what they looked for in a graduate and all agreed that there is a special quality that's not 'produced' that draws them to the actor. All also agreed that training was a worthwhile endeavor even though the biggest competition in screen work is from the non-trained actor. A trained actor is likely to have a more varied and longer career. A2 said she always looks for talent above a "look" as she has to be passionate about the actor in order to work for them. She also wanted an actor who knew how to be proactive with the down time whether it was through making their own work or continuing to take classes, understanding that their training is just the beginning. She also wants an actor to walk out of an audition knowing that they did the best they could and was flexible enough to work with direction.

CD6 said the quality she most admires is an enthusiasm accompanied by humility whilst another casting director (CD4) measured ability and personality as the two main attributes she responds to. She proposed that a good sense of themselves helps them to bring that easy confidence to their performance and that versatility, sensitivity and an enquiring nature are also strong attributes. The same casting director expressed concern at the lack of bravery amongst young performers saying that most play it safe and shy away from taking risks. She feels they lack the confidence to make bold choices and would like to see actors who feel empowered enough to offer something strong in the audition.

I asked these leaders what advice they might have for the schools and they all expressed how much the industry had changed over the last ten years. It's more the case now that graduates want to be stars rather than being artists and there was concern about how the schools fed that idea. Several of those interviewed expressed concern about the uneven standard of the cohorts and suggested that those schools who cull their weaker students are doing the remaining students a favor and graduating a much stronger group as a result. All without exception said that each school needs to spend more time on screen skills and on-set etiquette. Some suggested

more formal arrangements with networks and studios to give students a practical experience of a working set. CD1 said whilst she was happy to go to NIDA to talk to the students she feels it would be more beneficial for them to come to her studio one by one to have a more realistic experience of the reality of testing.

CD5 and CD6 questioned the selection process as they were so unimpressed with some graduates after three years that they wondered how those actors could possibly have been accepted in the first place. This was a particular criticism of NIDA, possibly because they had higher expectations of NIDA. There was also a recommendation to encourage actors to remain open minded and not to think of themselves as special in any way because of the particular school they went to. It was pointed out by one agent (A1) that she is looking to Flinders University and other smaller colleges to represent actors who she often finds more interesting than graduates from the more well-recognized schools. CD1 criticized the schools for inviting the same casting directors to talk to the students. This was shared by another casting director (CD5), who suggested that several workshop-style interactions with different casting directors would give the actors more exposure and experience. Some were critical of the choice of audition pieces in the showcase,<sup>17</sup> and felt that some actors were choosing pieces that they thought would please rather than the piece being a reflection of who they were. A1 was concerned with the need for VCA actors to move to Sydney and suggested that living where you have friends and family might make for more support in the difficult times.

The agents were critical of the intense pressure of the agent's day especially at NIDA, which is now such a large affair. They all wanted an opportunity to meet with the actors in a more informal setting. Several of the industry leaders were concerned about the lack of real industry knowledge amongst staff. They were critical of the career teacher and one casting director (CD4) was outspoken in saying that the teachers at one institution "have never worked professionally and are out of touch with the realities of the

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<sup>17</sup> The showcase is the presentation of audition pieces by the graduating year to an audience of Industry representatives. NIDA refers to this day as Agents Day.

industry”. CD1 said that the institutions with a larger percentage of teacher practitioners are leading the way and a rigid approach to actor training meant lack of flexibility in the actors.

## **7.4 THEATRE DIRECTORS**

I interviewed ten theatre directors who are currently working or have worked recently in Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide, Brisbane and Perth. Several are current or recent artistic directors of either State Theatre Companies or of small to medium sized companies. Seven men were interviewed and three women. Attempts were made to interview more women but proved too difficult with their professional commitments. The age range of the directors was approximately thirty to early seventies. The directors spoke anonymously, allowing them to give frank and concise opinions of graduates from each of the institutions. For a more detailed explanation of the background of each director please refer to Appendix five.

### **7.4.1 NIDA**

It was the opinion of all the directors interviewed that NIDA graduates are trained to a very high level for theatre. The consensus was that a NIDA graduate is generally capable of working at a high level with classical text and that they are well trained vocally. Most directors commented on the high standard of professionalism and the ease with which a NIDA graduate works within a company structure. One director (D9) saw this high level of professionalism as a “professionally useful obedience” and that NIDA graduates were particularly good at making quick decisions in a play reading setting. D3 believed that a NIDA graduate came to the job with “everything and more” and that “the brutality and factory like nature of NIDA breeds a strong actor”. These actors, D3 said, are “more likely to shift and change their performance, taking initiative to invent”. Another believed that as NIDA had the pick of the best auditionees it was likely to graduate a few each year that will be “wonderful actors” (D8).

Most commented on the confidence of the graduates as being both a strength and a hindrance. Whilst this confidence gave the actor a presence it didn't always make them "brave" or "bold" in the work. D5 considered this confidence to be "showiness" and that they had "a strong sense of who they're playing for". D7 said they had a "born to rule attitude", whilst D9 believed this made them "self protective with a sense of self preservation, so that they take care of their own performance and don't connect with the other actors".

D5 and D9 believed that the NIDA graduates looked too much to the director for approval with D5 believing that this meant they "censor themselves" and "there was the assumption that there is a correct way, looking to the director for too much guidance". One very experienced director (D6) who has worked with NIDA graduates over five decades believed they were too "institutionalized and mass-produced", and that there was "not as much creativity and willingness to improvise" in these graduates. He was critical that the experience was neither "encouraging nor inspiring" for these graduates. D2 was critical of the longevity of tenure of some of the teaching staff.

D5 commented that the way they work with text "is second nature but take that away from them and they flounder". D9 was also critical of the voice work, as she believed the graduates had "over produced" voices. She felt she had to spend a lot of precious rehearsal time shifting the actor from this voice to their own and that the actor was often confronted by this and nervous about the sound of their own voice. She also believed that the NIDA graduates were timid physically and that the acting methodology was "so dominant that it's difficult for other work to come in". She felt the NIDA graduate was "locked into end result rather than wandering into the wilderness of an idea" and that the independent theatre scene in Sydney is reflective of this as productions tend to be presented in order to advance the career of the individual actor. Several directors commented on the NIDA graduates' lack of freedom in the rehearsal room, with D10 claiming that the work "can be too much in the head and not particularly adventurous". He also believed they were not as "willing as VCA graduates to be lateral".



He put this down to the fact that the NIDA graduate worked more from the outside in, finding the shape and filling in the details later. D5 and D7 commented that fifteen years ago they would have cast mostly from NIDA graduates but today they cast equally from other schools, with D5 often favoring WAAPA graduates over NIDA graduates.

#### **7.4.2 QUT**

Most of the directors believed the training was geared for screen acting with one director (D7) stating “that there is a focus away from the skills that are useful for theatre – vocal training, text analysis, the ability to grapple with lots of different options, giving suggestions that are not ego based”. He also believed the QUT actors were incapable of “looking at the work as central rather than the person as central”. One director (D10) had recently auditioned a QUT graduate who was achieving success as a screen actor but found their work “unsophisticated, lacking in stage skills”. D8 believed these actors were poorly trained for classical work and questioned whether it was the training or the choice of actors accepted into the course. D2 also questioned the audition process as it appeared not to be focused on finding artists with a creative spark worth nurturing but more focused on a commercial look.

The actors were not seen as transformational actors with D7 saying he treats them as untrained. Teaching staff were criticized for not having worked in the industry with D3 believing that actors “should learn from practicing artists rather than academics or career teachers”. Several criticized the lack of protocol training and the naivety regarding industry expectations. It was believed by a few of the directors that whilst there are always one or two who “find their way in spite of their training” (D7) most QUT graduates would need to look to further training if they were to have successful careers in theatre.

One director (D9) praised the sense of truth that QUT graduates were able to tap into but believed that it was only possible to express that truth in a very small theatre such as the Stables in Sydney, and that the actor was

incapable of faking that truth, exposing the lack of technique. Most of the directors were critical of the reliance on emotion as a starting point. D2 commented:

The focus on one's own emotional life can be an impediment to abandoning oneself to the moment or another character. They come to the work with a preconceived idea of what the emotion is rather than discovering the moment. The technique creates a very selfish way of working as it's all about the actor's experience rather than being in a transaction with another person. Acting isn't always about emotion – emotion is the result of other things rather than being a starting point.

D9 also criticized the entry point into the work “as the actor came from an emotional starting point and was disconnected from the physical starting point”.

### **7.4.3 VCA**

Whilst there was a lack of uniformity in the response to the VCA graduates, there was a consensus that the best days of the training were under the guidance of Lindy Davies. Several directors (D6, D7, D8) commented that the graduates of recent years have been nowhere near as strong<sup>18</sup> and D7 said that “something remarkable” happened during Lindy Davies years at the school due to the “collegial atmosphere and collective ambition”.

The responses were quite conflicting which I think relates mostly to the different styles of direction pertaining to each director. D6, who deals mostly with classical work was not impressed with the vocal or textual skills of the graduates and felt the “showcase doesn't tell you if the actors can act or not as they mumble something. It's very low key and intense and made for television and doesn't show off their skills”. D5 agreed saying “their voice work is not as strong and text work not as strong as NIDA”. However D2 praised the vocal skills, saying he could always hear a VCA actor as he found “a greater physical range and a very good vocal richness” in these graduates making them “more vocally adept”. And D9 believed the VCA “women had good vocal strength particularly in the lower register”.

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<sup>18</sup> Since 2007 VCA has had to commit to the 25 actors taken into first year whilst in the past there would be fewer actors graduating. The uniformity of strength in a smaller group may account for the perception that the ability was higher during Lindy Davies years.

D8 commented on the strong ensemble skills of the actors, D2 praised their ability to “adapt in any working environment”, and D5 said they have “a preparedness to make work rather than just stage work with no assumptions about process”. D5 also believes the VCA graduate is “very flexible and able to go with the flow, being fast and ready with offers not limited to a particular palate or a particular style of theatre making”. She also felt “you can walk into the room and they will play and improvise”. D10, D5 praised the ability of VCA graduates to work “laterally”.

D8 and D9 pointed out that the VCA women are very strong with D9 believing that in recent years the women have been much stronger than women from NIDA. She felt keenly about this saying “they understand female logic when analyzing text and there is a willingness to discuss as they can argue female logic very well. They are able to talk about the work rather than engage in a conflict based conversation” (D9).

There were conflicting opinions of the methodology employed by Lindy Davies with D2 pointing out that VCA graduates are “adaptable in any working environment” and D3 believing the process can “get in the way”. D5, who has worked a lot with VCA graduates, believes they can “get lost in the truth”. D8 felt the process “spoke more to women and that the men may have responded better to action/objective work”. He had concerns about the work and believed that the strong actors would be able to incorporate the work into their own working method but “the middle range actor stood more of a chance of flailing with this work” (D8). He was often frustrated with VCA graduates, as “they would often access the feeling they had dropped in and be immovable from that” (D8).

D9 believed that even though the VCA graduates were very strong intellectually and were the strongest of all the schools in terms of approaching the work physically, they were incapable of jumping into the work and tended to think about it too much. She felt they were “ponderous vocally and physically, tending to take a while to enter the work and starting with very slow rhythms” (D9). This has led her to never combining VCA graduates with graduates from NIDA or QUT. D9 also believes they

work so differently that it takes too long to get them all on the same page. She acknowledged that often a VCA actor won't audition well and that as a director you had to trust they would get there as you won't get a sense of the final performance in the first read. She didn't see this as a disadvantage as the contract between actor and director could be one of exploration.

D10 commended the "organic connection to language, (the) rich inner life, (the) good moment to moment line to line (focus)" but felt they were "more comfortable in less conventional, more lateral work". "When working on naturalism with a VCA grad the actor would have to be satisfied with each individual moment and this would slow the process down rather than bouncing off the other people and finding something collaboratively. The work could be beautiful though" (D10). D10 also believes the greatest weakness of the VCA training is that the "performance can be too internal rather than transactional".

Several (D8, D9, D10) directors commented that VCA graduates are not as familiar with theatre company protocol as NIDA and WAAPA graduates and they believed that they were less used to working with designers and a production team during their training. There were also concerns that the rehearsal process the VCA graduates like to work in is not compatible with commercial time frames.

#### **7.4.4 WAAPA**

All the directors spoke very highly of the WAAPA graduates, praising the graduate's high skill level, the well-grounded attitude, the openness and the keenness to work. The physical work was complimented by D4 and D9 who attributed this work to the fearlessness and willingness of the WAAPA graduate with D9 saying they were "physically robust". D9 praised the voice work particularly as it didn't rob the student of their "own voice". The consensus was that the vocal work was very strong with excellent attention to text, making the WAAPA graduate comfortable in performing classical work. The personal and professional qualities of the graduates were particularly praised with D4 pointing to the "terrific charisma" of the

graduates and D5 saying she has always loved working with WAAPA graduates, enjoying their “enthusiasm and lack of ego”. D6 pointed out that “there’s a freedom and an exuberance”, and that “the WAAPA graduate comes from a happy, positive, creative training, speaking well of their experience (at the school)”. D10 said “the actors are easy to get along with and are without ego”.

In terms of the acting training the feedback was mostly very positive with D9 saying that they felt the training “set the students up well for the industry”. D10 felt that “their strength is in more conventional material” as the training was “a little conservative” and D9 said that the “classical work was a bit old fashioned with Shakespeare having an English sound to it”. Whilst most of the directors commented on the bravery and risk taking qualities of the graduates D10 felt they could be too reverent with text and were “similar to NIDA graduates in their inability to work laterally”. D5 summarized her opinion of WAAPA graduates by saying “a WAAPA grad sits somewhere in the middle between the showiness of a NIDA grad and the lost in the truth of a VCA grad. There’s an enjoyment in what they do”.

D4 noted that the grounded attitude of the WAAPA actors was partially to do with the environment in which they learned, which was shared with so many other performers in the Musical Theatre Course, the Aboriginal Performance Course, all the Dance Courses, the Music Courses and the Singing courses. The environment of the acting course itself was praised by most of the directors with D4 also pointing out the “great sense of support and nurturing atmosphere, with a genuine sense that the staff are there for the students, whilst also being realistic about the difficulties of the industry”. She believed this attitude was the reason why “the students leave with respect for their school and stay in touch” (D4).

It was commented by D6 and D10 that there is always a consistency of good graduates and D6 commented that he worked with a disproportionately high number of WAAPA graduates. As with the NIDA graduates, the directors commented on the strong protocol training of the WAAPA graduates.

It was seen as an advantage for the school to be located away from the eye of the industry but D4 and D9 felt that the lack of exposure to a broad range of theatrical experiences and a range of inspirational role models was a distinct disadvantage.

## **7.5 GRADUATE QUESTIONNAIRE**

NIDA, QUT, VCA and WAAPA graduates from 2000 to 2011 were invited to answer a questionnaire via a notice in the Media, Entertainment, and Arts Alliance ebulletin with some follow up needed due to the small uptake. Sixty-eight graduates started the questionnaire with only twenty-two completing. Five NIDA graduates, five QUT graduates, six VCA graduates and six WAAPA graduates completed. Poor design of the questionnaire may have led to the low completion statistics, as the questionnaire required multiple-choice answers concerning income and areas of work since graduation, as well as detailed responses to questions concerning the methodology studied and the efficacy of the training.

Due to the poor rate of completion I feel the data gathered may not be indicative of a broad enough cross-section of the graduate body. Bearing this in mind I have drawn the following conclusions from the respondents: The VCA and WAAPA respondents were uniformly satisfied with the experience speaking very highly of the training and the overall experience of being in the institution. The NIDA graduates, whilst commending of the training, were mostly not enthusiastic about the experience of their time spent at NIDA. The QUT respondents were mostly critical of the methodology taught at the school and less enthusiastic about the experience of having attended the school.

## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

### **ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS**

#### **8.1 COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ACTING METHODOLOGIES**

##### **8.1.1 Introduction**

As is apparent from the summaries of the teaching practices at each institution, there are very clear big picture similarities and differences in actor training at the four institutions surveyed. Both NIDA and WAAPA have firmly based their training programs in Stanislavsky's action and objective analysis, but not to the exclusion of other acting methodologies, embraced by and integrated into the courses by full time and sessional staff, or introduced to students by guest directors. Both also share the advantage of highly skilled full time voice and movement teachers, who have incorporated rigorous vocal and physical training into the courses. In fact the movement work at WAAPA is so thoroughly integrated that it serves as another entry point into the acting training program. VCA also boasts a well-integrated physical entry point into the work as supported by several of the theatre directors who found VCA graduates to possess a strong physical fluency (D5,D9,D10). In relation to skills classes, it is only at WAAPA that these classes are taught every morning throughout the three years of training, thus cutting down rehearsal time to afternoons only. At NIDA classes are diminished in third year and during rehearsal periods when full days are engaged.

Under Lindy Davies' leadership at VCA there was no Stanislavsky action/objective work but rather an integrated method of kinesthetic learning. Post Davies, whilst the core intent of her philosophy of intuition remains intact, students are now exposed to more rational approaches in second year. As with NIDA and WAAPA, skills training is extensive at VCA, taught by the appropriate number of specialist full time staff. The success of the VCA training lies in the philosophy of investigation, experimentation

and open discourse, supporting autonomous artists in creating new theatrical forms.

It is almost unfair to compare QUT to the other three schools in that there are fewer staff, with only three full time teachers, and a smaller budget to deliver the program. The main point of difference with QUT is the adoption of one single methodology, the Eric Morris technique, focusing on emotional preparation, which excludes the students from being exposed to other approaches in the primary acting classes. Only when working with outside directors will the students be exposed to other ways of working. Whilst there are skills classes, these are only offered in first year and half of second year.

I have identified the following areas of investigation as the appropriate framework within which to compare and contrast the methodologies and practices at each institution: acting methodologies in training, voice training, physical training, ensemble training, learning environment and course structure.

### **8.1.2 Acting Methodologies in Training**

When over-viewing the acting methodologies taught at each school it is difficult to separate acting from movement and voice as all three are intrinsically linked. Therefore, I will highlight the methodologies, regardless of their stylistic home, that are most obviously best serving the students at each institution.

It seems that the best elements of the training at NIDA, QUT and VCA are well-integrated into WAAPA's curriculum and philosophy. The methodology at WAAPA is broad and encompasses traditional Stanislavsky based approaches that encourage preparation before investigation as well as those that encourage exploration prior to determining outcome. One of the strengths of the NIDA training up to and including 2011 was textual and vocal rigor. Kevin Jackson's detailed 'scoring' of text combined with Tony Knight's approach to textual analysis, supported by the image work of Betty



Williams and the physical approach to vocal training practiced by Bill Pepper, has meant that these graduates are well skilled in a range of styles and are virtuosic in their ability to paint detailed and varied pictures with the text at hand. It would appear that this work is also present at WAAPA, as the WAAPA graduates have been praised for their ease with text, particularly within the classic canon (D9).

The ensemble based impulse work, so identifiable with VCA, is also present in the work up to and including 2011 at WAAPA. It's clear that the Peter Brook company members who had such a profound influence on Lindy Davies have also shaped the teaching practice of Lisa Scott-Murphy at WAAPA. What was essentially the core methodology at VCA became part of an integrated whole at WAAPA.

The influences of the American derivatives of Stanislavsky's system and of Jungian psychology, that are the backbone of the training at QUT, are also present at WAAPA through the Ivana Chubbick approach taught by Andrew Lewis. Extensive physical characterization work is supported by Scott-Murphy in her toddler's class and through the observation exercises attributed to Mike Leigh's approach as taught by Chris Edmund. NIDA has a reputation for teaching a well-rounded approach to physical characterization with observation exercises such as the rock star exercise in first year and classes in the physical efforts of Rudolf Laban.

Whilst extensive movement classes taught by NIDA's Keith Bain and Julia Cotton attended to both the alignment and flexibility of the body as well as awareness of the body in the space, Cotton still felt that there was a lack of focus on physicalisation as an entry point into the work, with voice work taking precedence. Lindy Davies' impulse work focused on the physical entry point, encouraging actors to follow their impulse to walk, run or sit, creating a physical expression of the moment. Theatre directors commented on the physical freedom of the VCA (D2,D5,D8,D9) and the WAAPA graduates (D6,D9).

### **8.1.3 Voice training**

As indicated in the biographies of the voice teachers at the various schools there is a lot of cross over in training with Tony Smith, Donald Woodburn and Julia Moody all studying NIDA's post graduate voice course. Smith and Woodburn studied under Bill Pepper and Moody under Isobel Kirk. Tony Smith also studied Linklater with Dianne Eden. Bill Pepper achieved a Master's degree from Central School of Speech and Drama as did Katerina Moraitis. Dianne Eden is a certified Linklater teacher and a master teacher of text. All the teachers were well aware of the approaches of Cicely Berry, Kristen Linklater, Patsy Rodenberg, Barbara Houseman and to a lesser degree Michael MacCallion, Frankie Armstrong and Arthur Lessac.

There are, however, several points of difference in the vocal training at each institution. Julia Moody at WAAPA was the only teacher to be skilled in the Catherine Fitzmaurice technique, which she uses extensively in the training. Her colleague, Donald Woodburn was the only teacher to have worked extensively with black actors, having taught in South Africa. From observing the low centre of gravity in these actors he determined that this was responsible for the elimination of upper body tension. Tony Smith at VCA was the only voice teacher to also be a qualified Alexander Technique teacher. He believes his methodology has changed immensely from incorporating the Alexander Technique in his voice classes, as he always incorporates the voice with physical activity. Bill Pepper at NIDA taught from a broad palate of influences and was also responsible for setting up the postgraduate voice course at NIDA. His colleague, Betty Williams, was renowned for her astute ear for accents and her encouragement of the imagination through connecting the words to the image. All of the voice teachers with the exception of Dianne Eden spoke of the importance of the imagination and how their role was to assist the actor in expanding their voice to their imagination.

Whilst there may have been quite different methodologies taught by the acting teachers there was uniformity in the influences of the voice teachers.

There was however a distinct difference in the perception of the vocal training from the industry leaders. Whilst NIDA graduates were praised for strong text skills and vocal strength and range, they were criticized for having over-produced voices (D9). Several directors believed that it was difficult to shift the NIDA graduates back into their own voice and that the process was quite confronting to these actors (D9,D5). On the other hand WAAPA graduates were praised for vocal strength and flexibility whilst maintaining their own sound (D9). VCA graduates were praised with strong vocal presence and range, particularly the women (D2,D9), but QUT graduates were considered to be under skilled vocally with one director considering the QUT graduates untrained (D7). Clearly QUT actors are disadvantaged due to fewer hours spent in skills classes, a concern to Dianne Eden. Eden also spoke of her reticence to impose on the actor's process, saying that she felt she was a better teacher years ago. This would suggest that the need to attain truth in performance, as outlined by the Eric Morris technique, is in fact limiting the technical expansion of the actors studying it, therefore disadvantaging the actors in the development of their entire instrument.

#### **8.1.4 Physical training**

The WAAPA and VCA graduates were praised by several of the theatre directors for their physical awareness and responsiveness (D5,D9,D10). Whilst VCA has a strong reputation for innovative and experimental theatrical forms, the strengths of this ensemble based, impulse led training is also reflected in the movement work as taught by Lisa Scott-Murphy at WAAPA. Unfortunately I have tried many times to contact Leisa Shelton from VCA to discuss her work but we have been unable to connect. This does represent a distinct hole in this research. I am therefore only able to draw conclusions from the details outlined in Lindy Davies' *The Autonomous Actor* (2000) as to why her work has been so successful. The areas of study include anatomy and comprehension of the limitations of the body in movement; identifying personal physical patterns; physical transformation; astute physical awareness of self and self in space; an aligned connection to breath in movement; relaxation in movement and in being watched; the

development of a critical eye in one's own performance and those of others; the development of an awareness of the theatrical elements of time, space, rhythm, shape and silence; focus on the moment; and working within an ensemble. The movement course also incorporated philosophies embraced in the overall curriculum such as the understanding of the connection between the mind, body and the emotions.

Similar to VCA, the physical ease within the WAAPA cohorts is due to the integration of the movement approaches into the core acting training, with teacher Lisa Scott-Murphy directing projects as well as running movement specific workshops. Physicality becomes another entry point to acting rather than an adjunct subject. This intrinsic integration represents a fundamental difference with the physical training at NIDA and QUT. Julia Cotton would have liked to have seen more emphasis put on the movement stream at NIDA with the inclusion of non-text based work and greater development of self devised projects. NIDA graduates are however known for their physical presence and poise but this is not the case with the QUT graduates. Movement workshops have been haphazard at QUT with various sessional staff covering Suzuki and Viewpoints. As movement has not been an integrated discipline, with no full time staff teaching a physical approach to the work, there were no staff to interview regarding movement.

#### **8.1.5 Ensemble training**

One of the strengths of the VCA program is the emphasis on ensemble training. The positive effect of this methodology is clear, as so many VCA graduates create their own companies, some of whom, such as director Simon Stone, are responsible for a dramatic shift in the theatrical landscape in Australia, creating new theatrical forms. Whilst WAAPA does not have a tradition of graduates establishing their own companies, the WAAPA graduates are, however, known to work very well in a company structure. The emphasis on ensemble based physical training as an incorporated acting methodology ensures that the WAAPA graduates are not only great team players but are conscious of their role within the whole of the production. Whilst NIDA graduates were criticized for being arrogant

(A1,A2,D5,D7), this was not an observation of WAAPA graduates, who may feel a greater sense of belonging when compared to the larger more public aesthetic of the institution that is NIDA. The lack of ensemble training at QUT is responsible for the self-focused nature of the work of the graduates as remarked upon by several of the industry leaders (D7,D9). With the nature of the methodology being such that each actor is encouraged to focus on their own personal life, the training appears not to provide a structure for working as an ensemble.

#### **8.1.6 Learning environment**

The supportive environment at WAAPA appears to encourage the students to be expressive in themselves and to feel empowered in the act of creativity (CD5,CD1,D4,D5,D6,D9,D10). Whilst there are some drawbacks to the location of WAAPA it is clear that this distance allows the students to develop in a less pressured environment. As a result of this community environment the students appear to, on the whole, graduate with a good sense of themselves and openness in their work (D4,D9). Whilst each school sets out to create a similar environment, WAAPA has several advantages. The acting course at WAAPA is situated within a larger performance campus, creating a very stimulating atmosphere of performance training in acting, dance, music, singing, musical theatre and Aboriginal performance. This allows for the actors to see themselves as artists in a greater field of creativity and not as the only performers. Whilst this assists in an ego alignment (D5,CD5) it also serves to open the actors up to the allied arts in a very practical way, in which they can respond imaginatively, socially and spiritually. The overarching philosophy at WAAPA has been to support students, who on the whole have moved to Perth from the Eastern States, through the transition into the intensive conservatoire training. Community based processes, such as having the first year actors audition for the whole school enabling the entire school to embrace their ability, are long standing WAAPA traditions. The WAAPA students are also at an advantage being based in Perth away from the pressures of the major centres of Sydney and Melbourne. This assists to keep the school operating as a cocoon of

creativity, unaffected by the many distractions of the thriving film, television and theatre industries.

NIDA students are particularly affected by being in Sydney as they are “on show” from second year (A2), as the general public and industry leaders will see their shows. NIDA students are also acutely aware of the industry around them as they mix with recent graduates who are working or attempting to get work in the field. From the start of first year they are aware of who the agents are, what projects are being cast, who’s working where. This exposure to the industry is responsible for taking away their innocence, a quality that WAAPA students are able to maintain. QUT students have also been praised for maintaining this sense of innocence, as they remain sheltered from the mechanics of the industry in the southern capitals. Whilst VCA is located in the thriving industry town of Melbourne, the philosophy of the VCA is such that students are encouraged to challenge existing art forms and so the creative forces at work in Melbourne are more likely to stimulate the VCA actors in their pursuit of artistic independence rather than setting a benchmark of standard to be reached. The acting course at VCA is also located within the larger arts college encouraging an interchange with artists from other disciplines.

Some staff at WAAPA expressed strong socialist views that encouraged equality amongst the student cohort and steered away from a hierarchy amongst the staff. Such beliefs encouraged mutual respect staff for students and students for staff. Several of the WAAPA and VCA staff spoke of encouraging an ‘egoless state’ with Angela Punch-McGregor saying, “As an amateur Buddhist I find the correlation between human evolvment, spiritual evolvment and consciousness, is also the same philosophy- that the intrusion of the neurotic ego brings our behavior down and it brings the acting work down too” (Punch-McGregor interview 2011). Lindy Davies spoke of her strong alignment with Buddhist philosophy and the power of using the meditative state in training. This focus away from the self and on the work is very different from the ‘self focused’ work at QUT as perceived by D2:

The technique creates a very selfish way of working as it’s all about the actor’s experience rather than being in a transaction with another

person. Acting isn't always about emotion – emotion is the result of other things rather than being a starting point.

The design and use of the physical environment does have an effect on the sense of belonging to the school, which, in turn, does affect the student's sense of self. Current NIDA students that I have taught have been critical of the over use of the NIDA buildings for Open Program activities. Not only does this preclude NIDA students from using rehearsal rooms and studios outside of school hours but it also serves to open up the school making it difficult to maintain an atmosphere of a creative incubator. The physical space at VCA was purpose built with consultation from Lindy Davies to provide not only an array of studio spaces but also many varied potential site specific performance spaces. There is a strong sense that when you are in the building you are in the creative environment of the Drama department. QUT uses a variety of spaces scattered around the Kelvin Grove campus. Whilst there is a small area of admin and studio space there is presently not a delineated space that fully encompasses the acting department.

#### **8.1.7 Course Structure**

When comparing the structure of each course it is apparent that WAAPA is achieving the best balance of training for theatre and for screen. As both the theatre directors and the casting directors interviewed spoke most favorably about the WAAPA graduates it would suggest that the two areas are being well serviced. It could be argued, however, that the theatre training at WAAPA is still quite traditional and that there is not as much emphasis on self devised theatre and theatrical experimentation such as found at VCA. The students at WAAPA spend the most number of hours in skills classes and still perform in a total of ten plays, plus two major film projects, over the three years. Even though the number of hours in the rehearsal room on each production is less than that of the students at the other schools, each actor still has the benefit of stretching themselves in the playing of ten theatre roles. This balance of in-class learning and in-production learning is clearly having a very positive effect on the WAAPA students. Staff teachers support each production within the morning class,

and, as not all actors are called to every rehearsal, there is still time for each actor to work independently, and with the support of staff teachers, when not required in rehearsal. NIDA has dropped the number of plays performed from six to four with an in studio performance in first year. This now places NIDA as the school with the least number of fully produced plays, as VCA produce six, QUT six and WAAPA ten. Considering the clear benefits of a balance of in-production learning and in-class learning, NIDA students are at a distinct disadvantage with so few productions in which to develop performance capacity.

Whilst NIDA has addressed the imbalance of screen and theatre training by recently establishing a film studio under the direction of industry veteran Di Drew, previously NIDA had been regarded as primarily a theatre training school. Whilst many NIDA graduates have achieved great success in Australia and internationally in film and television, the perception from casting directors was that, historically, not enough time was been given to on screen performance. CD1, CD2 and CD4 all felt NIDA graduates could be too theatrical in screen tests and were often over-prepared, compromising their ability to respond to direction (CD2). QUT has been a leader in the production quality of the graduation show reel but as the cohorts are very uneven in ability this has not put QUT at the top of the pile in terms of outstanding screen performance. One casting director (CD1) was particularly surprised that the standard was so low from QUT given the emphasis on screen performance. This is either a reflection of the direction they receive, the preparatory acting training or indeed may simply speak to the type of actor that is taken into the course. One theatre director suggested that QUT might be accepting actors with a more commercial look rather than those with true artistry (D8). Clearly QUT actors are at a disadvantage with skills classes on offer only up to mid way through second year. Whilst they will perform in six plays and two screen projects they will not have the same support from staff that WAAPA or NIDA actors will have. Dianne Eden spoke of her frustration at not having the funds to extend the skills training. VCA spends a very small amount of time working on screen performance with, in recent years, no show reel produced on graduation.



The casting directors noted this as a limitation and would like to see more time put into screen performance (CD1).

VCA is clearly leading the way however in self devised and experimental theatre forms as well as the encouragement of a more lateral approach to performance. It was also noted that the VCA female graduates were very strong and had an obvious ability to argue female logic (D9). It is fair to say that under the clear direction of the inspirational leadership of a woman such as Lindy Davies, the women in the course were encouraged to express themselves. This strong female leadership has since been continued under the direction of Tanya Gerstle, supported by Melanie Beddie.

## **8.2 FINDINGS**

### **8.2.1 Which acting methodology?**

In terms of which acting methodologies to adopt to best prepare the actor for a multi-faceted career, I feel it is imperative to not look to specific modes of training but to look to the desired outcomes of training and to shape a curriculum that can deliver these outcomes according to the skills of staff and guest directors/tutors in order to create a unified training. I have formulated a list of desirable outcomes derived from the industry interviews and in response to those graduates who did complete the questionnaire.

- The student actor must learn in a respectful environment where they are acknowledged as artists and empowered to explore their artistry in a challenging, inspiring environment, allowing for personal autonomy making them their own 'experts' in the field.
- The learning modality of each student actor needs to be identified and respected in order to best serve that student's ability to learn and advance.
- The student actor must learn approaches to acting that they can draw on to either formulate their own approach or use selectively depending on the particular challenges of each project.

- The student actor must have had as much ‘in performance’ experience as is possible, and in so doing develop the confidence to take on large and complex roles on stage.
- The student actor must have had extensive training in the practicalities of a working film or television set and have had as much experience as is possible in on-screen performance.
- The student actor should be well informed as to Industry expectations and standards as taught by practitioners with extensive quality experience in the field.
- The student actor must have developed a vocal awareness and through the voice training be confident to perform both contemporary and classic text of the most demanding nature. The student actor must be confident in the sound of their voice, maintaining the authenticity of their voice, and easily be able to find a vast range in pitch and color in order to bring life to the imagery of the spoken word.
- The student actor must have a physical fluency, so that through astute physical awareness is able to easily adjust his or her own physicality to the demands of the role. This should also include the ability to access the work via a physical entry point rather than an intellectual one.
- The student actor must have the ability to work in an ensemble, be easily affected by those around them and have a generosity of spirit.
- The student actor should be encouraged through example to bring a lack of ego as well as a sense of play and joy to the work.
- The student actor should be encouraged to question, through rigorous analysis, all aspects of the work, from the writers intentions, the style of writing, the political/social context of the piece and the historical placement of the work.
- The student actor must feel they are validated regardless of gender, ethnicity, upbringing, sexual preference, political affiliation or social views. This validation must be reflected in the work undertaken by the students that should encompass

the complexities of human experience rather than portraying stereotypes of gender or race relations.

- The student actor should at all times be made aware of how the training came to be valid and who was the original designer of the training or how it has been modified.
- This is the age of reflexivity and the actors' training must reflect this, enabling the actor to reflect on and reflect in their practice and by so doing develop an attitude of autonomy in the improvement of their skills.

Many of these elements already form part of the training methodology and underlying philosophy at each of the Institutions but this study has shown that clearly not all are firmly embedded in the four schools. I believe it is the responsibility of the institution to provide the student with the necessary skills for a vocation, especially as that student will have spent their undergraduate years and a sizeable amount of money on the training in the expectation that they will be entering the industry.

### **8.2.2 Leader in the field**

There is no doubt that each institution is particularly strong in one or several elements of the training, as outlined above. However it is clear from this research that the actor-training program at WAAPA achieves the most consistent results in terms of best preparing actors for work in theatre and in film and television. Whilst many of the strengths of the WAAPA training are also present in the other schools, and in some areas other schools may be stronger, it is the combination of approaches that has proven to be most effective. It must be acknowledged that the focus of this study is efficacy of the training in light of employment in what some would regard as a narrow field – that of screen work cast by leading casting directors and theatre work at one of the State theatre companies or other small to medium well recognized companies. Consequently this study does not acknowledge many experimental or fringe areas of employment that are indeed entirely valid and that may accommodate graduates from a particular training.

The success of the WAAPA curriculum is in the combining of a wide variety of methodologies and approaches supported by rigorous vocal and physical training that helps and not hinders free expression. The teaching practices are well supported by an inclusive, supportive learning environment with strong community values. This emphasis on equality and ethical considerations assists in the delivery of a clear pedagogical practice, supported by teachers with both extensive experience in teaching and in professional practice. Not only are a wide variety of methodologies introduced, but also appropriate consideration is given to the training of theatre as well as on screen skills. WAAPA boasts a gender balance in both the student and staff cohort, allowing for a non-biased approach to gender issues. There is also a culture of reflection practiced by staff within the institution and instilled within the student body. I will now expand on the benefits of these practices as they relate to the schools and to the field in general.

### **8.2.3 Variety of methodologies and approaches**

It would appear that Lindy Davies' emphasis on identifying the learning modalities of each student is also embraced at WAAPA, as there are varying approaches to the work from the physical characterisation of Mike Leigh's philosophy, the targeting approach of Declan Donnellan, the analytical approach of Stanislavsky's actions and objectives and the lateral approach to performance influenced by the esoteric nature of Yoshi Oida's aesthetic. There are clearly benefits to this varied approach to the work, as each student actor will find their own entry point. It appears that at WAAPA students are allowed to develop their own approach influenced by all that has been on offer.

Whilst different approaches to acting are introduced at NIDA by various sessional staff, the core philosophy during the scope of this study was rooted in Stanislavsky's action and objective analysis. The approach, as taught, encourages the actor to make certain decisions prior to exploring the scene. Decisions in the shape and stress of the speech are also encouraged through Kevin Jackson's approach to semantics. Whilst I have

highlighted the benefits of this approach, the disadvantage for NIDA students is that they have not had the opportunity to combine this approach with different entry points at the same time. I did not realize the importance of providing different entry points until I undertook this research. Not only will an array of entry points hopefully accommodate the different learning modalities of the students, it will also better prepare them for the different working methodologies of the various directors and the different styles of work that they will end up experiencing on graduation. By working with two or more approaches at the same time the student actor will understand that there is no 'right' way but many different approaches and combinations of approaches depending on the material at hand. The effectiveness of the WAAPA approach is in the mutual companioning of these approaches throughout the training.

#### **8.2.4 Clear Pedagogical Practice**

Acting training has a long history of disempowering the trainee, by following the prescribed approaches of others.  
(Prior, 2012: 36)

Referring again to Ross Prior's book *Teaching Actors* (ibid.), he posits that the history of actor training has been dominated by the passing down of knowledge learned by the acting teacher, not always with an understanding or explanation of where the original concepts come from, encouraging a blind acceptance of exercises and a 'teacher knows best' philosophy that has in fact disempowered the actor. This mode of teaching has placed the teacher as expert and denied the student the attainment of his or her own expertise. Prior poses the following:

A challenge to traditional notions of expertise is derived from more recent understandings of *situated learning* advanced by Lave and Wenger (1991). This is part of a growing body of work in the human sciences exploring the *situated* character of human understanding and communication that challenges traditional notions of expertise and models of learning. *Situated learning* explores the relationship between learning and the social situations in which learning occurs – not the acquisition of propositional knowledge but rather *learning as co-participation*. The individual learner is not simply gaining a body of knowledge, which is transported and reapplied in differing contexts later on, but rather the learner acquires the skill to perform by actually engaging in the process (legitimate peripheral participation)

(Lave and Wegner 1991). The learner is positioned albeit 'conditionally' as 'expert'. This is a shift in the focus of learning from classical notions of the individual mind acquiring mastery over processes of reasoning and description, by processes of internalizing and manipulating structures.  
(ibid.: 86)

I would pose that this approach to learning is in line with the kinesthetic approaches taught by Lindy Davies and that many of the current and past teachers in this study would incorporate a similar approach often unknowingly.

Prior usefully outlines four categories of knowledge that define the acting teacher as: personal knowledge, social knowledge, practical knowledge and intellectual knowledge (ibid. 91). He suggests that personal knowledge shapes the teacher's practical knowledge and may include self-actualization. I would suggest that this personal knowledge might come about as a result of self-examination and self-reflection not only on one's artistic life but also on one's relationship to the world in general. Prior defines social knowledge as that formed by the influence of other teachers and by political and social points of view; practical knowledge as both known skills and that knowledge that presents itself in the moment of problem solving; and intellectual knowledge as that learned and understood knowledge that adds to the teacher's practical knowledge (ibid.: 91-92). He makes the very important point that much knowledge is tacit and that this tacit knowledge is often that that identifies an expert in the field, as it presents itself unconsciously (ibid.: 92-93).

In the light of these aforementioned modes of attaining knowledge it would appear that the acting teacher, and other teachers of practical art forms, has greater demands placed upon them in acquiring knowledge than is placed upon teachers of most other disciplines. Prior ascertains that the understanding of meaning in the work taught "has long been associated with the practical act of *doing*" (ibid.: 88).

For example, *Dewey (1968{1916})* identified that meaning is derived from one's capacity-to-do. 'Meaning is related to doing, where doing relates to direct experience'. (Stevenson 2008:8) Direct personal

experience is *synnoetic*. 'Meaning in doing is concrete rather than abstract, and specific rather than general.' (Stevenson 2008:8) This emphasis on the practical rather than the theoretical builds a practical knowledge, which is predominately exhibited in the literature on acting training. Therefore the types of knowledge exhibited by actor trainers are likely to be influenced by this practical and experiential history of understanding.  
(ibid.: 88)

I would therefore pose that the ability to teach acting should thus be derived from a deep experiential understanding of the process of acting, gained by reflection *on* the process and reflection *in* the process. This coupled with an intellectual and practical understanding of various methods of entering the work and an experienced understanding of different modes of acting methodology, could make the teacher more sympathetic to the realities faced by the student actor as well as giving them a greater understanding of the demands of working in the field. Of course one must consider that the way the teacher enters the work may not suit all students who indeed may have a different learning modality to that of the teacher.

This thesis suggests that the teacher can only teach what they themselves have had an 'experiential' understanding of. If the teacher is teaching a preparation method, they need to have experienced it themselves in a professional context, as an actor, and been alerted to the strengths and weaknesses of that particular process. If the teacher is making demands of the actor in terms of how they should perform, the teacher must have experience in the delivery of professional theatre in a contemporary context. This experiential understanding is however just a part of the prerequisites for strong teaching and alone may not prepare the teacher for expert tutoring. Whilst many of the areas of study taught at WAAPA are taught in the other schools, it seems that the pedagogy is quite different. Students were not in fear of their teachers nor set them up as gurus but spoke of them respectfully. The VCA graduate respondents also spoke very highly of their teachers and their experience on the whole, and is a clear indicator of the benefits of incorporating an attitude of unconditional positive regard as introduced by Lindy Davies and embodied by present staff at VCA.

### **8.2.5 Practitioner teachers**

Industry leaders (CD4,D2,D3) criticized those institutions that did not employ practitioners but were instead reliant on long serving career teachers. They were concerned that these teachers were out of touch with the trends in performance both on stage and on screen, as they had not had to prove themselves professionally. It's true that a practicing director may be accountable for industry standards different from those of a teacher-director. In order to maintain a career at a high level, an industry director must be speaking to or challenging the zeitgeist and if he or she is not successful in that they will soon find themselves out of work. This professional pressure works as a kind of audit on the director's capabilities, hopefully fashioning them into the very best in the field. However, the same director may not necessarily possess the wherewithal to assist a young actor in making appropriate choices in the learning environment. A director at the top of their field may not necessarily make a good teacher, but could be more conscious of an appropriate end result performance fitting, or excelling, current industry standards. On the other hand the teacher-director who may not be able to sustain a professional career as a director could, as a result of many years of teaching experience, be better equipped with a multitude of approaches in shifting an actor's performance.

According to this research, the WAAPA graduates are best prepared overall for employment for both theatre and screen roles. WAAPA also has the largest number of practicing artists on staff and it would be fair to say that there is a correlation between the two. This practitioner-led teaching is reflected positively in the student experience not only in the work taught but also in the professional ethics of positive regard and mutual respect. Andrew Lewis is a practicing television and theatre director as well as an actor and writer; Angela Punch-McGregor is a practicing actor; Chris Edmund is a practicing writer; and Julia Moody is a practicing actor. Lindy Davies remained a practicing director during her time at VCA and on leaving VCA went straight into directing work in Australia and abroad. Her ethical approach of unconditional positive regard was a reflection of how she preferred to be treated as an artist. The advantage of practitioner



teachers is that they are experienced in both fields of teaching and practice. I know for myself that if I have had a recent experience as an actor I will teach very differently. I will acknowledge the complexities and difficulties in the work and come to the problem solving from a less dogmatic angle. By practicing my craft I am able to reflect on what works and what doesn't and am able to teach from a more empathetic place. Perhaps the schools should observe similar principles to the Australian Film Television and Radio School where each head of department is employed for a finite period, attracting industry practitioners at each change over.

#### **8.2.6 Gender issues in staff and student body**

Whilst there are no hard statistics to support the benefits of a gender balance in staff there are particular indicators that have arisen in the research that would suggest a correlation. WAAPA enjoys a gender balance amongst staff as well as an even number of male and female students in each year and I do believe this is a contributing factor to the success of the course and worthy of mentioning. Due to the often personal nature of actor training, it would stand to reason that a student may feel more comfortable with a teacher or mentor of one gender over another. I believe it's important that the student have the option of seeking guidance and mentorship from a teacher of either gender. If this is simply not on offer it may impact on the student's emotional well-being. Although the small number of completed graduate questionnaires compromised this research instrument, it is still worth noting that the gender issue was certainly evident in some of the responses. All the VCA respondents who completed the questionnaire spoke very highly of the leadership team at VCA and when compared to those from other schools the VCA respondents were the only ones unanimously agreeing that they were not subjected to any gender bias. This included male and female respondents, supporting the supposition that there is a philosophy of inclusion in place at VCA.

### 8.2.7 Culture of reflection

Whilst it could be said reflection *in* practice is observed by all the teachers at each institution by the very fact that each will draw on their individual wealth of knowledge and experience in the moment to shift and shape an actor's performance, reflection *on* action may not necessarily be embraced by individual teachers or within the governance of the school. Angela Punch-McGregor made note of how in her relationship with her husband she has an ongoing dialogue about acting and theatre and film in general, encouraging her to reflect constantly on what her belief systems are. Chris Edmund spoke of how his observations of classes at the St Petersburg Academy, the Moscow Art Theatre School and the Paris Conservatoire were inspiring him to rethink some of his own methodology. This kind of reflection *on* action may well contribute to the open learning environment at WAAPA.

When viewing managerial structure and effectiveness, Reynolds (2011) applies three modes of reflection: technical, aligned and critical. By addressing these applications of reflection to the teaching of actors in the four institutions various strategies for policy and procedure are revealed.

**Technical** is the problem solving work that might happen in a rehearsal or class. Reynolds suggests that within an organization the focus will be on the process, as the outcome is presumed to be in line with the philosophy of the organization. In an institution where there is a core philosophy this may be the case but in a school such as WAAPA or NIDA where there are many different approaches taught the outcome may be influenced by the teacher's aesthetic. The desired outcome of this technical reflection would then need to be clearly laid out to the students so they can understand what the desired aesthetic may be. There may be very different aesthetics desired by different teachers. The process may also be individual to the different teachers requiring a very clear outlining of the approach at the outset.

**Aligned** reflection refers to the shared outcome being in alignment with the policies and practices of the organization. Reynolds considers that the

organization would have a common purpose to which the participants would align themselves. In terms of actor training this emphasizes the importance of a clear curriculum. In the case of Lindy Davies' clear outline of training in *The Autonomous Actor* or Lenard Meenach's overriding influence of Eric Morris, there would appear to be a common purpose. At NIDA and WAAPA it may be more difficult to articulate this common purpose and indeed each teacher may have a different focus. The question here is: How important is it for the students to be aligned with a central philosophy or methodology in the school? And if there are multiple methodologies taught, what is the over-arching philosophy of the school?

**Critical** reflection within the organization assumes there may 'be different, even contradictory interests at stake' (ibid.:9). This brings up the question of how to deal with these contradictions and how best to deal with held beliefs of individual teachers that may not have been scrutinized within the greater cohort of teaching staff. Reynolds suggests that within the organization there needs to be a critique of the power play of individuals and the effect they may have on the culture of the organization as a whole. The question within each institution would be who should conduct this interrogation of practices. A healthy organization would have transparent processes within it to address any issues in the teaching practices that might be detrimental to the growth of the student. I do not intend to hold the lens to the corporate dynamics of each institution. That study is well beyond the scope of this paper. I will however propose that the organization with a healthy organizational system will best support the training of the actor.

My aim within this paper is to question my own practices and I hope that by examining the practices of each institution and holding the standard of their graduates under the lens of future employees this paper may serve as a critical reflection not just on each institution but on actor training in Australia in general.

Reynolds poses that, historically, management education has focused more on content rather than process and the same could be said in regards to

actor training. Whilst the methodology at each institution is defined by an overriding philosophy it appears that only at VCA is the process of education a core tenet of the overriding course structure. Whilst the institutions may focus on *what* they teach they are not always as critical about *how* it is taught. This is not so well defined at WAAPA, however there does seem to be a strong collegial environment that supports a tradition of mutual respect student for teacher and teacher for student. This concept has had a profound influence on the atmosphere at the school resulting in graduates who appear to have a good sense of themselves. NIDA has been seen as having a more hierarchical structure with strong benchmarks for success and a tradition of hiring teachers from alumni of the school. The value of critical reflection within each of these institutions is that long held beliefs and structures can be aired and dissected, and perhaps improved upon.

### **8.3 CHAPTER SUMMARY**

With approximately seventy actors graduating each year from these four institutions alone is it viable that each Institution offer a training program that endeavors to prepare actors to work across theatre, film and television? From the industry response it is clear that not all of the institutions are preparing actors well for all mediums. WAAPA seems to stand alone as succeeding in producing actors that are highly castable for all mediums as each industry leader felt WAAPA graduates were well trained for screen, as reported by the casting directors and agents, and for theatre as noted by all of the theatre directors. VCA is focused on the institution being a 'theatre laboratory' but the expectations of the industry (all casting directors and agents) and of graduates would suggest that the students would benefit from more on screen training. Perhaps VCA needs to be more forthright in claiming themselves solely as a theatre training school. The industry response to QUT graduates suggested that the competence level of each graduating year was uneven (CD1,CD2,CD3) and when there were strong graduates in a year they were most likely better suited to screen performance (D7,D9,D10). NIDA has had a tradition of producing very strong actors particularly well trained for classical theatre. Whilst the

training is rigorous there was a perception amongst the industry leaders that the NIDA graduates lacked a freedom and spontaneity and that it took several years for these graduates to relax into the work (D5,D6,D9,D10,CD4). I suggest that the pressure of being a successful applicant from over fifteen hundred applicants and the pressure to succeed in the final year of training under the watch of the public eye may be contributing factors as to why NIDA graduates are more fearful in the work. The recent introduction of the film studio has amended the criticism that NIDA actors are not receiving enough on screen training.

Industry responses need to be understood in the context of the relative resourcing of each institution. QUT, for example, has a total full-time Acting staff of three, compared with NIDA's seven, WAAPA's six and VCA's six. Whilst all the Institutions have a strong component of sessional staff, the budgets to hire these staff are not the same at each institution.

In this chapter I have concluded that WAAPA is the leader in actor training in Australia. Many of the methodologies practiced at WAAPA are also practiced at the other schools, but the particular combination of acting, voice and movement methodologies, along with the philosophies inherent in the school, have all contributed to this outstanding program. I have also formulated a set of desirable outcomes for actor training, based on the feedback from the industry leaders and influenced by the outstanding practices of each of the schools.

## **CHAPTER NINE**

### **CONCLUSION**

#### **9.1 ACTING METHODOLOGIES REVIEW**

I have determined there to be several key areas that deserve scrutinizing when determining effective practice in actor training. My research supports the implementation of a holistic approach that addresses a variety of 'entry points' into the work. Broadly speaking, these entry points could be defined as intellectual and kinesthetic. Neither of these terms does true justice to what I intend but hopefully represent two distinctly different modes of learning. Intellectual processes suggest an amount of decision-making in determining the shape of performance prior to investigation, in the process of rehearsal or performance. Kinesthetic processes imply the discovery of character, relationship to other characters, relationship to time and space, and connection to text within the process of rehearsal or performance. The two are not mutually exclusive as there are some processes such as Practical Aesthetics that employ an intellectual analysis of the whole play, the scene and the given circumstances, without determining the playing of each moment, allowing for a spontaneous connection to text and relationship in that moment. Stanislavsky's system, as taught at The Drama Centre, London and subsequently handed on to Australian teachers, employs the determining of the character's objective in the scene in relationship to the character's super-objective within the play. In order to maintain the pursuit of that objective the actor is encouraged to play 'actions' on each line that might assist them in achieving the objective. The determining of these transitive verbs on each line supposes a 'mapping' of the scene, whereby the actor will have already determined how they are going to play each line. The personalization of the scene is encouraged through identification with the given circumstances of the character, asking the actor to identify with that character in that time and place experiencing the issues at hand. This approach demands a fertile imagination as the actor is asked to put themselves in the shoes of the character. There are several shortfalls to this process, the most obvious being that by

predetermining the use of actions for each moment of text, the actor is not allowing themselves to be affected by their fellow actor or by the other external stimuli in the scene. Essentially the actor is acting in his or her own bubble. The strength of this approach is however that the actor has asked many questions of the text in order to determine the overall want of the character and the process of achieving that within the story. This of course will also help determine the actor's relationship to the protagonist and ensure they are sure of where the focus in each scene lies.

There have been countless reinterpretations of this system and with the modern audience's keen sense of truth it has been necessary to develop methodologies that encourage actors not to hide behind the façade of character but to bring a true representation of the writer's portrait to life. Character is a contentious concept. The traditional Stanislavsky approach would have the actor 'playing the character' complete with physical and vocal adjustments that assist in the representation of that role. What was once considered representational<sup>19</sup> has now become presentational,<sup>20</sup> as the modern audience has become more difficult to fool. Therefore, an actor-training program that concentrates purely on the Stanislavsky approach, as understood in Australian schools, is denying the actor the ability to experience a true spontaneous expression of the moment in the work and risks being too theatrical and thence unbelievable. Moseley corroborates this idea in his book *Meisner in Practice* (2012) agreeing that the proliferation of television and film has made our audiences astute to believability and "today's actors are therefore required to do whatever it takes to make the audience *feel* they are experiencing something real" (ibid.:4).

Similar pitfalls remain with the employment of a purely kinesthetic approach. If the actor is encouraged to discover sense and meaning in the

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<sup>19</sup> Representational acting defines a style of acting that is a true representation of the character with emphasis on believability. The audience is most likely to have an unconscious experience of the character's journey, being drawn into the emotional life of the character and the playing out of the story.

<sup>20</sup> Presentational acting refers to a style of acting that does not involve a genuine personal connection to the character from the actor. Emphasis may be on presenting a defined picture of the character often with defined vocal and physical gestures. The audience is most likely to have a conscious experience of this kind of acting, observing the outward manifestations of the character rather than being drawn in to the emotional life of the character.

process of rehearsal, are they ignoring the complexities of the writing by having not analysed the text? Are they open to becoming lost in the discovery of the work and in so doing become too self-focused, enjoying the experience of the discovery at the cost of the greater meaning of the play? I would therefore propose that there must be a combination of approaches employed whereby the actor is encouraged to conduct a deep analysis of the story and the character's role within it and also develop the ability to be open to discoveries in the moment. The American Method as developed by Lee Strasberg has been associated with the art of *being*. In response to Stanislavsky's later work teachers such as Sanford Meisner developed approaches based on the art of *doing*. Both approaches reflect the dogmatism that has been the stamp of actor training, as one camp claims its territory and excludes all other approaches. Again there is a middle ground that encompasses both being and doing, both the intellectual and the kinesthetic.

The role of emotion is another area that has caused much debate in actor training with some believing a focus on emotion breeds self indulgence in the actor and others claiming that few trainers recognize the importance of emotion. It cannot be denied that an actor must personalize the experience within a scene in some way in order to be believable. Should they relate to the given circumstances, imagining the character's experience as if it were their own as is encouraged in a Stanislavskian approach? Should they identify the essence of what the character is experiencing and through a process of reliving a similar experience in their own life, express a truthful emotional state, as is encouraged by the Eric Morris technique? Should they relate to the essence of what the character is *doing* in the scene or trying to achieve and, without relating the given circumstances to themselves, seek a situation where they too would need to achieve that objective, as is suggested by *Practical Aesthetics*? Or is personalization a more detailed exploration, in which the actor associates personal sensations, memories, associations with each word or image, allowing the text itself to carry the emotion, as practiced in Lindy Davies' approach? Each of these approaches may work for different actors but if only one approach is taught there will always be actors who may not relate. The key



is to allow many and varied approaches in order for the actors to develop their own working method.

## **9.2 THE ACTOR OF THE FUTURE (OR PERHAPS OF THE NOW)**

I would pose that now, more than ever, there is a greater demand on actors to be very highly skilled in all areas of the training across all media. I will use Brisbane's La Boite Theatre Company's 2012 production of *Tender Napalm* by Philip Ridley directed by David Berthold, as an example of the demands being placed on actors in contemporary theatre.

The performing of *Tender Napalm* demands exceptional skills training and reflects the trend of contemporary playwrights in writing more adventurous works, challenging the traditional play form. Similarly, contemporary directors are keen to employ multi-disciplinary art forms in their productions, placing further demands on actors. The La Boite production of *Tender Napalm*, with a cast of just two actors, required the actor to have an astute understanding of play structure, story structure and textual nuance in order to deliver the text heavy script. The use of richly laden imagery required the actor to access an imaginative landscape and have the vocal skills to paint that landscape in detail, demanding extreme vocal range, great vocal power and stamina, as well as the ability to shift instantly from the world of imagery to the naturalistic. The director's choice of incorporating modern dance and a demanding physical fluency in the work meant that the actors were required to have a sophisticated knowledge and know-how of modern movement. As well as the very high level of skills required for this production the play demanded that the two actors were involved in a complex psychological web requiring them to affect each other and be affected by each other in order to shape the themes and story of the play.

With the decreasing budgets of so many theatre companies, writers are writing plays with fewer characters, as supported by the proliferation of two-hander plays currently and most recently produced nationally and internationally. This, coupled with the current trend to expand the writing

beyond traditional limitations of purely text driven expression, highlights the need for rigorous skills training in voice and movement coupled with sophisticated and varied applications of acting methodology. A course that is not providing both intense skills training to complement the acting methodology is short changing the students' experience and sending them into the profession under trained.

In terms of film and television training there are many varied forms of performance required and it is limiting to only teach one acting methodology or to limit the field of study under one idea of on-screen training. The graduate must be well skilled in a kind of 'hyperrealism'<sup>21</sup> as required in many feature films as well as the many demands of fast turn-around television. Budget restraints in television are also meaning that even in the high end product a lot more is shot in one day, putting pressure on the actor to achieve the desired outcome in fewer takes and to be agile enough to move from one scene to the next, often going from one episode to another where there is little if any continuity.

### **9.3 CONCLUSION**

This qualitative study, grounded in practitioner expertise and underpinned by reflective practice, has surveyed the field of actor training across four key institutions, weighed up the efficacy of the methodologies taught at each school against held beliefs and opinions of some of Australia's most highly respected industry leaders, and determined effective practice for the future. Perhaps it is time to establish an Australian acting teaching pedagogy course that would not only require the postgraduate student to examine in detail various forms of acting training but also to study in depth the delivery of those techniques in a professional actor training setting. In the meantime I would encourage the establishment of an informal avenue for teachers of acting to talk openly about *how* they teach as well as *what* they teach, in order to share the successes and challenges confronting modern actor training in Australia. Whilst there is peer dialogue in the broader field

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<sup>21</sup> I use the term 'hyperrealism' to describe the genre of performance often seen on film that requires extreme subtlety of performance, requiring the actor to act as the thing observed rather than 'performing'.

of drama studies, there is little if no engagement from teachers of the acting programs in this discourse. This is apparent from the non-attendance of the leading Drama School staff at the Australian Drama Studies Conference, the lack of a conference targeting these Drama Schools specifically and the lack of published material reflecting active discourse between the schools.

As acknowledged throughout the paper there were limitations to the scope of this study. It has, however, brought to light several areas that would benefit from further examination. A longitudinal study of the graduates of the institutions could offer a keen picture of the patterns of employment of individual actors and may or may not assist in supporting the outcomes of this study. As all the institutions are experiencing changes in course structure and staffing it would be of great interest to conduct this study with graduates from several different years.

The detailed list of desired outcomes forms the basis for further investigation into how these outcomes could shape the teaching of actors and provides the structure for the possible future of acting methodology delivery.

Finally, this study has forced an intense reflection on my own practice and made me question what remains relevant to the modern actor. The findings have encouraged me to incorporate more entry points in the work I teach and to remain ever vigilant about not just *what* I teach but *how* I teach it.

## **APPENDIX ONE**

### **Acting graduates questionnaire**

What school did you attend?

VCA    WAAPA            NIDA            QUT

What year did you graduate?

Your age at graduation

Gender

Profile of work since graduation:

Number of theatre shows since graduation

Number of theatre shows with one of the state companies or other major theatre companies since graduation.

Number of guest appearances in television since graduation

Number of main cast roles in television since graduation

Number of lead roles in film since graduation

Number of support roles in film since graduation

Number of very small roles in film since graduation

Number of shows self devised in an ensemble

Number of shows on which you instigated the production

Amount of money earned in commercials since graduation

Least amount of income earned in one financial year solely from acting since graduation

Most amount of income earned in one financial year solely from acting since graduation

Can you identify the acting training methods that were taught at your school?

Do you use these acting techniques specifically?

Do you use a hybrid form of all you have learnt?

Have you made up your own way of working?

Do you feel your training has equipped you well for work on stage?

If so, please detail the elements of your training that serve you well.

If not, please detail what you feel was missing in your training to assist you in theatre work.

Do you feel your training has equipped you well for work in television?

If so, please detail the elements of your training that serve you well.

If not, please detail what you feel was missing in your training to assist you in television work.

Do you feel your training has equipped you well for work in film?

If so, please detail the elements of your training that serve you well.  
If not, please detail what you feel was missing in your training to assist you in film work.

Do you feel your training equipped you for the emotional highs and lows of the industry?

If so, please detail the elements of your training that serve you well.

If not, please detail what you feel was missing in your training to assist you.

What were the strengths of your training?

What were the weaknesses of your training?

Did you feel there was any gender bias in the way you were taught or directed at your school?

How would you best describe your response to not getting a job:

(tick more than one if you need to)

I accept that I did the best audition I could've done and I let go of it and move on.

I usually feel really frustrated and/or angry as I feel I'm the best person for the job.

I tend to overeat or get drunk or what ever to dull the pain of the rejection.

I usually think I'm not going to get the role anyway.

I try to get feedback on how I did and then objectively weigh up what I could do better next time.

Can you outline in a short paragraph how you usually approach a role for theatre.

Can you outline in a short paragraph how you usually approach a role for television.

Can you outline in a short paragraph how you usually approach a role for film.

Do you feel the vocal training you had has equipped you well for all media?

Do you feel the vocal training you had has equipped you well for all media?

Who do you rely on for constructive feedback on your work?

Do you feel your initial training was enough or are you still seeking more training?

Are you glad you went to your school?

If not what other training path do you think would have suited you better?

## **APPENDIX TWO**

### **Questions for industry professionals**

Over the last 10 years have you noticed any clear difference in acting style between graduates from NIDA, VCA, WAAPA and QUT?

Is it possible to determine any difference at all between the different trainings?

Can you outline any strengths and weaknesses of each school from your perspective?

What are the main qualities you're looking for from graduates?

Do you feel graduates are prepared for work in film and television?

Do you feel graduates are prepared for work in various different styles of theatre performance?

Have you noticed a different work ethic from the various graduates?

Have you noticed a better sense of self from graduates from different schools?

Is it essential for actors to have had a three-year training to work in the industry?

From your many years experience in the industry do you feel the schools are producing a different actor today from 20 years ago? What are the differences?

The style of acting seen on many television programs and in many films today requires the less is more approach, do you feel graduates are equipped for this?

What would you like to see more of from graduates?

What advice would you give to the schools to help them stay in touch with contemporary industry demands?

What advice would you give graduates in terms of keeping themselves ready for work?

## **APPENDIX THREE**

### **Acting Institution Staff questions for discussion.**

Please tell me a little about your path to where you are now.

What are the biggest influences in your methodology?

Please describe the training you put your students through over the three year period.

How would you expect a third year student to approach a role?

What is your take on the contemporary style of 'no acting' found especially in film and some television and some theatre?

Can you tell me something about the career paths of your students.

Please outline the methodology you employ in your teaching, including any influences that may appear in your teaching.

What books would you recommend?

Please outline the kind of ideal outcomes you have for your students, including how you would best imagine they would approach a role.

How would you describe your teaching method?

What would you say were the challenges you face in teaching your methodology – both from students and from the industry?

In your experience what methodologies have you found not to work?

Could you briefly describe the philosophy of your school?

Are ethics standards in relation to teaching a priority in your school?

## **APPENDIX FOUR**

### **Casting Directors and Agents**

CD1 Casting Director Sydney. Large organization casting a broad range of projects including big budget American films and television series, local television series and miniseries.

CD2 Casting Director Sydney. Large organization casting a broad range of projects including big budget American films and television series, local television series and miniseries.

CD3 Casting Director Sydney. Large organization casting a broad range of projects including big budget American films and television series, local television series and miniseries.

CD4 Casting Director Sydney. Smaller organization casting mostly local feature films and television series.

CD5 Casting Director Melbourne Large organization casting across all areas but predominately in television and commercials.

CD6 Casting Director Melbourne Large organization casting across all areas especially for Australian feature films and short television series.

A1 Agent representing both established 'A' list actors and emerging actors

A2 Agent representing both established 'A' list actors and emerging actors



## **APPENDIX FIVE**

### **Theatre Directors**

D1 - Senior Sydney director who has worked for all the State theatre companies as well as commercial theatre

D2- Current artistic director of a small company, has worked across many of the state theatre companies and some of the smaller companies

D3- Senior director, Artistic director of state theatre company, has worked with all the state theatre companies

D4- Artistic director of a small theatre company

D5 –Artistic director of medium to large company, has worked with all the state theatre companies as well as several of the smaller and medium to large companies.

D6 - Senior director, artistic director of medium company, past artistic director of several companies. Has directed for most State Theatre Companies

D7- Artistic Director State Theatre Company, has worked for most State theatre companies and several of the medium sized companies.

D8 –Associate director of a major theatre company, has worked extensively with various State Theatre companies

D9 –Current artistic director of a small theatre company. Has directed for several small companies and two state theatre companies.

D10 –Artistic Director of a small to medium company. Has directed for State theatre companies and small companies

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Brisbane Director (D2) Interview 18 November 2011

Brisbane Director (D3) Interview 8 November 2011

Brisbane Director (D7) Interview 29 November 2011

Cook, G. Interview VCA Melbourne 17 May 2011

Cotton, J. Telephone Interview 4 August 2012

Davies, L. Interview Melbourne 28 May 2011

Eden, D. Interview QUT 8 November 2011

Edmund, C. Interview WAAPA 17 June 2011

Gerstle, T. Interview Melbourne 11 November 2010

Jackson, K. Interview NIDA 12 May 2011

Janisheski, J. Interview NIDA 1 February 2012

Knight, T. Interview NIDA 12 May 2011

Lewis, A. Interview WAAPA 17 June 2011

Meenach, L. Interview QUT 8 November 2011

Melbourne Casting Director (CD5) Interview 18 May 2011

Melbourne Casting Director (CD6) Interview 14 December 2011

Melbourne Director (D5) Interview 13 December 2011

Minnett, L. Interview NIDA 12 May 2011

Moody, J. Interview WAAPA 17 June 2011

Moraitis, K. Interview NIDA 12 May 2011

Pepper, B. Telephone Interview 22 October 2012

Perth Director (D4) Interview 17 June 2011

Punch-McGregor, A. Interview WAAPA 17 June 2011

Scott-Murphy, L. Interview WAAPA 17 June 2011

Smith, T. Interview VCA Melbourne 17 May 2011

Sydney Casting Director (CD1) Interview 2 February 2012

Sydney Casting Director (CD2) Interview 2 February 2012

Sydney Casting Director (CD3) Interview 2 February 2012

Sydney Casting Director (CD4) email Interview 27 May 2011

Sydney Director (D1) Interview 3 December 2011

Sydney Director (D6) Interview 10 June 2011

Sydney Director (D8) Interview 29 May 2011

Sydney Director (D9) Interview 13 February 2012

Sydney Director (D10) Interview 15 February 2012

Vickery, K. Interview NIDA 12 May 2011

Williams, B. Interview NIDA 12 May 2011

Williams, L. Interview NIDA 1 February 2012

Woodburn, D. Interview WAAPA 17 June 2011

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## Introduction to practice-led papers

*The (two) projects require candidates to employ advanced research strategies and applied reflective approaches in focusing on an element of their industry practice.*

Doctorate of Creative Industries QUT course outline

The following two projects were completed as part of the original course for the Doctorate of Creative Industries, QUT. The emphasis in both these projects was on reflective practice and the role of that reflection in extending practice. Originally the degree required three projects of a smaller nature, whilst currently the course requirement is for two extended projects. Consequently these shorter projects had a much greater emphasis on practice-led research with a great emphasis on the practical mentoring by industry leaders. In the first of these projects I tested the acting methodology that I had been teaching in a classroom setting, *Practical Aesthetics*, in a fully produced production with young actors. This was also my first large scale directing experience in which I used the full technical advantages of QPAC's Cremorne Theatre. The essential mentorship I received from experienced director Kate Cherry, assisted in this transition from classroom to stage. This support is not reflected in the paper itself as the focus of the study is on the efficacy of the acting approaches employed, however in order to fully understand the nature of the study one must take into account the positive outcomes of this rich mentorship.

This project reflects my practice as a teacher of actors and explores the transition from teacher to director. The second project extends this by addressing the directing of professional actors and challenging the methods by which they are directed. My industry mentor on this project was esteemed dramaturge and translator of Jon Fosse's works, May-Brit Akerholt. Again this was an intensely rich and productive professional relationship. Ms Akerholt not only guided my direction as a result of her intimate knowledge of the text at hand but also provided dramaturgical support by questioning my decisions and acting as provocateur to my instincts. The outcome of this relationship is referenced in the paper but does not do justice to the immense influence that Ms Akerholt has not only

on this production but on my development as a director in general. As the main tenet of the degree is 'to develop an ongoing critical dialogue between research and professional practice' these two papers must be viewed as only a part of that dialogue. The 'in practice' results were clearly placed in the practice on the stage. I hope the photos of the two productions might help to capture some of the intangible elements of this research.

## DCI Practice-led Project #1 Brief

### EXPLORING PRACTICAL AESTHETICS WITHIN THE DENSE TRADITIONS OF ACTOR TRAINING.

(As witnessed in the production of *Mad Forest* by Caryl Churchill)

Location of Project:

Production – *Mad Forest* by Caryl Churchill, performed by the students of  
the NIDA Brisbane Young Actors Studio

Cremorne Theatre, Queensland Performing Arts Centre

Wednesday 20<sup>th</sup> December, 2006

Project Mentors:

Academic Mentor: Dr. Jacqueline Martin

Professional Mentor: Kate Cherry



The photos presented in this paper were taken by Andy Miller and include cast members: Sebastian Angborn, Benjamin Bonar, Annabelle Brett, Fletcher Casey, Alexandra Cod, Lauren Earner, Gemma Forsyth, Georgina Horsburgh, Cosimo Pay, Meaghan Reynolds, Matt Scully, Grace Stewart, Aidan Street, Linda Taimre, Gavin Zimmerman. Set and costumes were designed by Kieran Swann.

## **BACKGROUND**

I am an actor with a strong interest in actor training as reflected by the eclectic nature of my own training. I studied for one year at London's East 15, I graduated in 1985 from NIDA (National Institute of Dramatic Art) and having worked extensively with company members of The Atlantic Theatre Company of New York. The Atlantic Theatre Company teaches the acting technique, Practical Aesthetics, which I have championed through out Australia in major Acting Training institutions such as NIDA and WAAPA (Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts), in smaller institutions such as QUT (Queensland University of Technology) Performance Studies and ATYP (Australian Theatre for Young People), in the industry through classes and on set in various feature films and television series. As a practitioner and teacher I am primarily concerned with 'action' led performance. The specifics of this approach to actor training are a departure from those methods traditionally taught in the major institutions in this country and it is the antithesis of the American 'Method' training. In my research I am keen to test the concepts of Practical Aesthetics in a real-life practical application in directing a production, as well as investigating how other modes of actor training can complement the technique.

Significant influences on my practice:

- The teaching of the late Nick Enright as learnt from Mel Shapiro at NYU (New York University).
- The work of The Atlantic Theatre Company as expressed in the acting technique Practical Aesthetics.
- The vocal training methods of Michael MacCallion (East 15) and Cicely Berry as taught at NIDA.
- The physical improvisational techniques of Joan Littlewood (as taught at East 15).
- The direction of significant directors with whom I have worked: Nick Enright, Richard Wherrett, Adam Cook and Michael Gow.
- The observation and influence of significant actors that I have worked with: Robyn Nevin, Ruth Cracknell, John Bell, Max Cullen, Olympia Dukakis, Leo McKern.

## PRACTICAL AESTHETICS

The Acting Technique 'Practical Aesthetics' focuses on training the actor in the pursuit of action as influenced by Stanislavsky's later work. The principles of the technique are quite simple.

- An actor must first look to the script for the clues that the writer has given the actor as to what the character is doing in each scene and in relation to the whole.
- An actor must determine what the character wants in the scene.
- An actor must find how that objective relates to them in a particular sense and so determine an action for the scene.
- This particular action will also have universal echoes for the audience.
- An actor must be able to personalise that action.
- An actor must always work 'off' the other actors in the scene in order to fulfill the character's scene objective, thereby creating an inter-relational practice.

Many of these points are not dissimilar to other acting techniques but some are vastly different. This project will examine how these principals apply through practical application in the rehearsal room. This project will be an attempt to move away from the limitations of applying one strict 'technique' to a rehearsal process. Rather, the rehearsal process will start with the application of the analysis techniques as laid out in Practical Aesthetics, employ the fundamental principles of Practical Aesthetics and then look to other influences so as to achieve the best results from the actors.

In the words of Carole Gray, "...a characteristic of 'artistic' [creative practice] methodology is a *pluralist* approach and use of a *multi-method* technique... *tailored to the individual project*."

Gray (1996:15)

At the outset it cannot be determined what other methodologies the project may draw on or if Practical Aesthetics will be complete enough or not to assist in the direction of this project.

The group of actors were aged between 16 and 20 and have committed to the fee paying part-time NIDA Young Actor's Studio. Classes were held each Sunday for six hours and catered to a wide variety of ability, sophistication and experience.

## **AREAS OF INVESTIGATION**

The areas of investigation will include:

1. The actor's preparation prior to rehearsals.

This will include the research necessary for the actors to have a complete understanding of the project. It will also include the individual preparation of each scene in terms of analysis.

2. The director's preparation prior to rehearsals.

This will include research, design consultations, budget concerns, script analysis for each scene as well as for the whole play.

3. The effective use of each rehearsal day incorporating the following:

- Maintaining an atmosphere of interest, excitement and commitment to the project
- Assisting the actors to achieve a level of depth and truthfulness to their performance
- Assisting the actors to find a physical and vocal freedom in their performance
- Encouraging a healthy group dynamic of a working ensemble
- Empowering the actors to make creative decisions that give them ownership of the project
- Productivity and time management- remaining vigilant against those things that could corrode the process.

## **AIMS**

This is a practice-led research project. The aims are as follows:

1. To discover the strengths and weaknesses of the acting technique, Practical Aesthetics.
  - a. To tell a story on stage through the pursuit of action so as to engage the audience in the complexities of the story being told and the resonances it holds within.
  - b. To determine what other acting techniques the director will naturally gravitate toward in order to make the overall production work.
  - c. To determine the place for vocal and physical training in relationship to Practical Aesthetics.
2. To determine the director's strengths and weaknesses in her cumulative methodology as expressed through the direction.
3. To explore the creation of a new technique that builds on the strengths of Practical Aesthetics and other methods that come to the fore during the rehearsal process, thus creating a hybrid approach to training actors in a rehearsal process.

In this way the project will determine whether Practical Aesthetics can stand on its own as an acting training technique or whether it must borrow from other sources in order to bring to life the story of the play. Given the inexperience and varied abilities of this group it's likely that I will need to draw on many different techniques and approaches. If Practical Aesthetics cannot stand alone, then what are the weaknesses within the technique and from what sources can they be strengthened?

## PROFESSIONAL PROJECT PLAN

The phases of the project design:

The project will be in three parts.

1. The presentation of the finished product of the production of *Mad Forest* by Caryl Churchill.

This part of the project will constitute the 'research as performance' element of the project. It will be for the examiners to determine whether the investigator has achieved what she has set out to achieve: The telling of a story through the pursuit of action on stage so as to engage the audience in the complexities of the story being told and the resonances it then holds. This will take place on Wednesday 20<sup>th</sup> December at 2pm and 6.30 pm at QPAC's Cremorne Theatre.

2. A detailed record of the processes that were involved in training and directing the actors in the production.

This part of the project will be completed after the production and will be available for examination in April 2007. This record will take the form of a journal. It will contain the following:

- A paper analysing how effective the implementation of Practical Aesthetics was in the production; an analysis of the detailed diary to assist in determining findings; a detailed analysis of the rehearsal process highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of the investigator's process; a detailed analysis of the results of a focus group in order to determine if the outcomes of the production were achieved.

3. A formal presentation of the research.

This presentation will take place in June 2007.



At this time the outcomes of the research will be presented and any new methodology that may have been created. The presentation may include practical application of the techniques explored as demonstrated by actors.

This presentation will also be available for assessment in April 2007.

**Exploring Practical Aesthetics as a complimentary methodology  
for actor training in a production of Caryl Churchill's *Mad  
Forest*.**



The aim of this paper is to analyse to what extent the acting training technique, Practical Aesthetics<sup>22</sup>, was effective in achieving an holistic acting training process, for a group of young actors in a production of Caryl Churchill's *Mad Forest* (1990). I will also critique the other training methods that were used to complement Practical Aesthetics. To this end I will test the methodologies against the comments of a focus group, the two project assessors and the reflections of both the participants and myself. The final aim of the paper is to determine a multi-dimensional methodology that could have best served the production.

The function of the DCI is to investigate and interrogate practice and this project represents an important cross-over point as my practice moves from that of teacher to that of director. Can the approaches used so effectively in the classroom situation be utilized to good effect in a production setting? The process of reflection on action and reflection in action (Schon, 1983) will hopefully assist in advancing my practice to the next level.

## **Introduction**

In 2006 I co-ordinated the Brisbane NIDA Young Actors Studio. The 16 students, aged between 16 and 20, met each Sunday for 6 hours over the four terms of the year. In that year they had a variety of teachers conducting classes in voice, movement, Commedia dell'Arte, acting for camera, monologue preparation, musical theatre and a brief introduction to viewpoints. I taught them the fundamental acting basics, modeled on David Mamet's acting technique, Practical Aesthetics (Bruder et al, 1986). Most of the students had no previous training. Some were studying at the same time with various 'method'<sup>23</sup> teachers.

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<sup>22</sup> Practical Aesthetics is the acting training method taught by The Atlantic Theatre Company of New York. I studied with the company in 1994 and have since brought many of the master teachers to Australia to run workshops in Sydney. These workshops were held at NIDA and at Practical Aesthetics Australia, the Australian annex of The Atlantic Theatre Company of New York, of which I am a co-founder.

<sup>23</sup> Four of the actors were studying in another private one-year acting program where the emphasis was on emotional preparation in line with Lee Strasberg's 'method'.

In term four I directed them in a production of Caryl Churchill's *Mad Forest*, a play originally written for drama students at London's Central School of Drama. Churchill and director, Mark Wing Davies, travelled to Romania not long after the deposition of the dictator, Nicolai Ceausescu on Christmas day in 1989 and together with the cast of drama students they interviewed Romanians on the impact of the Ceausescu government and the results of his downfall. The resultant play consists of three distinct sections: the first reflects the lives of two families of different social standing under Ceausescu; the second section is delivered in a verbatim style in which the interviews were presented as stories reflecting the days of the uprising; and the third section returns to the lives of the two families witnessed in act one, as they deal with life in Romania post revolution.



## **Research**

In this project I was keen to see whether the work I had done with the actors in the classroom would hold in a full-scale production. Would Practical Aesthetics translate from the classroom to the stage in order to bring the play to life in an exciting, theatrical and meaningful way? Would

Practical Aesthetics be enough and if not what other techniques would I need to employ?

Practical Aesthetics is a technique devised by American writer and director David Mamet, and American actor William H Macy. The technique is heavily influenced by the philosophies of Sanford Meisner, as both Mamet and Macy were his students. Practical Aesthetics shares the central tenet held by Meisner's approach to actor training, that 'acting is the reality of doing'. This philosophy differs greatly from Lee Strasberg's 'method' acting as it encourages the actor to 'do' rather than 'be' (Krasner, 2000). The emphasis is on the pursuit of physical action as found in Stanislavsky's later work, as opposed to his earlier focus on sense memory and emotional recall (Clurman, 1975). Practical Aesthetics is quite distinct from the more traditional English drama school model in that it doesn't encourage a creation of character as a first step for the actor. Practical Aesthetics holds true to Aristotle's theory from *The Poetics* that 'The Character is the sum total of their actions' (Lucas, 1968). Through the implementation of this approach the actors had learned to thoroughly analyse the script, determining the characters through-line, attending to the protagonist's journey and determining a scene objective for each of their scenes as well as a scene action. This scene action enabled the actors to deal with the specifics of 'how' they were to achieve the character's objective. This approach emphasises the constant progression of the scene and forces the actor to be ever conscious of their purpose in it in relationship to the driving needs of those around them. One could call this a 'front foot' approach in that each actor remains focused on achieving their goal in relationship to the stimuli around them. The process also includes a personalisation preparation in which each actor relates to the need of the scene action. The big difference between this approach and most others is that the actor is not encouraged to relate to the given circumstances but to the 'doing' of the action. How could a group of middle class Brisbane students possibly relate to the issues facing everyday Romanians caught in such a life and death conflict? Regardless of how much they researched the issues and used their imaginations it would be impossible for them to find a deep personal connection to such trauma. When asked to relate to the

individual actions of each scene they were able to find a close personal connection, placing them in the universal 'doing' of that scene. An action may be termed as the following: to gain someone's confidence; to get a guarantee; to put someone in their place; to force a resolution. These universal actions take the actor out of the overwhelming difficulty of relating to the complex given circumstances and give them something to 'do'. The result of which will be the telling of the complex story.

I felt quite confident that Practical Aesthetics would serve us well in preparation for the first and third sections, however the middle section posed a challenge, due to the verbatim style of the writing. There were pages of text for each of the eleven characters and I felt it would not be sustainable for the twenty minute section. I felt the section needed to be expressed physically, reflecting the particular dynamic of the actual uprising. This historical event took shape over a crucial week of chaos, during which a few key events sparked interest and gave the Romanian people permission to speak out for the first time in many years. In researching the events leading up to the uprising it seemed as if it had been well planned but nobody knew who was planning it with the public being swept up in a wave of excitement.

As was reflected in the middle section of the play the uprising was confusing as the people took to the streets, were shot at, retaliated and ultimately were unclear whose side who was on. I wanted the verbatim section to reflect the excitement of being able to speak out for the first time, the confusion about what was really going on, the brutality of the deaths and the victories of the people. I was however keen to avoid choreographing this section in preference for having the physicality come from the group. In line with my philosophy of not imposing my directorial agenda on the working process of the actors I believed the cast would have final ownership of the piece if they were to discover the physical shape as a company. This process is messy and frustrating and there are always those who look to others for guidance rather than instigating from themselves. Rather than employing total anarchy I decided to create a structure from which to explore physical dynamics by using the fundamentals of



Viewpoints. A physical training system originally devised for contemporary dancers, Viewpoints was expanded by director Anne Bogart, founder of the SITI Company (Bogart and Landau 2005), into a comprehensive physical entry point technique for actors. The viewpoints themselves explore time and space and through an ensemble-based process actors are encouraged to stretch and explore notions of kinesthetic response, duration, tempo, repetition, shape, gesture, spatial relationship, patterns of movement and the use of the architecture of the space. This structure allowed the ensemble to use elements of the research from the play to instigate physical story-telling and in so doing worked together cohesively in a powerful way.

Another element of our rehearsal preparation was the actor's research component. I asked each student to prepare a topic for discussion at our second rehearsal. The topics covered political, social, environmental, philosophical and literary questions about Romania. I also had the entire cast read *The Hole in The Flag* by Andrei Codrescu (1991). Codrescu is an ex-pat Romanian who went back to Romania from his new home in America just after the revolution. It was a very accurate account of the days leading up to and the months following the revolution, which was the exact time frame of the play. This clear understanding of the issues at play were magnified when the cast was introduced to a Romanian woman who had settled in Brisbane. Camelia had left Romania two years after the uprising with her two sons to start a new life in Australia. She talked about the positives as well as the limitations of life in Romania. I think the whole cast felt very responsible from that moment on to present this play with a great sense of dignity and compassion, without ever appearing patronising. This partly accounts for the focus group's positive comments regarding passion, commitment and sophistication. I was also credited for having made sure the actors performed convincingly in the same style, making it clear that they were 'in the same play' and that their understanding of the story being told was comprehensive.



## Challenges

The biggest challenge we had was lack of time as I only had the actors for a total of nine Sundays, from 9am to 5pm. We had one day to fit up the show in the theatre and one day to do a technical rehearsal and dress rehearsal with just two public performances. As well as the group rehearsals I conducted a few individual sessions on clarity and sense of speech and voice teacher Ros Williams also spent time on individual work with a few of the actors. In these sessions Ros and I focused on connecting the actors to the thoughts and meaning of the text and encouraging them to be bold in their delivery of the text. I was constantly bringing the actors back to ‘what do you want in the scene – make your point!’

There was also the challenge of disparity of ability and life experience amongst the cast. Some actors were quite adept at the text, others were very challenged by it. Some actors inhabited their bodies very well, others just didn’t know how to use their bodies at all. There was a huge difference in life experience between the sixteen year olds and the twenty year olds. Many of the actors were from upper middle class backgrounds and the



social issues of the play were far removed from their experience of life in contemporary Brisbane.



The play itself presented us with two distinct challenges. The first and final sections are naturalistic, dialogue driven scenes, while the middle section is made up of eleven characters speaking directly to the audience about their experience during the uprising. How were we to differentiate between the more naturalistic scenes in the first and third sections and the verbatim piece in the middle? The viewpoints workshops for section two were fruitful. Firstly, we did some ensemble building work exploring the nine viewpoints followed by the introduction of images from the events of the play as stimuli for play. These were associated with images of being constrained and suddenly being able to speak out, of needing to make public your feelings, of response to gunshots and death. The actors were mostly very responsive during the 35 minute open viewpoint, creating a strong sense of unity and responding to the stimuli with precision and commitment.

I had my assistant director write down what came out of this as there were terrific shapes and poses and clusters of activity. Our simple set comprised a series of wooden stakes from which were hung sheets of cloth. These were used to create very interesting images, interactions and physical and emotional responses, often inspired by the mix of frenetic Romanian gypsy-inspired music and other more haunting violin solos.

We then went back and worked out how we could get to these shapes within the context of the play. We tried incorporating the dialogue and as soon as we did the actors cut off their physicality altogether. It was a challenge for all of us to combine the physical boldness that they had explored in the exercises with the power, clarity and emotional richness of the text. I allowed this to run in a pretty chaotic form until we slowly gained some clarity around the text. My fears about this section meant that we probably spent too much time on it at the expense of the first and last sections. In the end the middle section worked the best and had we more rehearsal time we could have evened this up.

Here is a section from my reflection of the first day of working on Act two:

Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> November

We had a terrific open viewpoint exercise using the set. The actors were very inventive with themselves, each other, the space, the set, and the tempo. We added gibberish with volume and pace viewpoints. That was also very successful and we added music at some stages. So many ideas came out of it – images and energies, rhythms and dynamics. The cloth was used in so many different ways – as placards, as a shawl, as a sheet to make love under, as a cape, as a skipping rope, as a bondage thing. The rope was also used to great effect to pull each other with, as a hanging rope for Ceausescu, as a tug of war rope between the people and the soldiers.

So where is the place of action in all this? It is the key – it will keep the actors focused on intention rather than looking like they're in a viewpoints exercise. I want the viewpoints to be a training tool rather than an outcome. The next act two session will be a big one. We'll start with a viewpoints warm up and then move into costume and character work and then in to the act – stopping and starting and slowly working through it and then running it – that will be a whole day's work. I think I'll make the session in two weeks on act two again. It is the biggest part of the play.

After our first few read-throughs of the play the cast were very concerned about how we were going to realise the second section. They were doubtful of the process at times and right on board at others as reflected in these blog entries:

I'm not going to lie – it's been a process and a half, getting this play together.

Monday. December 4, 2006

This has been the biggest challenge. I really had no idea how to approach it. Mad Forest was like nothing I'd ever done before and it was so fun!

Tuesday. December 19, 2006

I'm not surprised that the show is coming together, but it was a bit scary for a while. I'm not sure why it came together – I don't mean this in a cutting way, but in the sense that I think there are a few possible answers and I'm not sure which one it is. Maybe it was all the groundwork we'd already done in terms of developing character, working with physicality etc. and other things in terms 1-3. I would like to test how much more difficult it would be comparatively to pull off this kind of show with a group who had only just got together.

Monday. December 4, 2006



The challenge of act one and three was to have the actors commit to their actions fully, resisting any emoting or gross characterisation. For those playing roles older than themselves the focus was on relaying the essence of that person from that older perspective rather than taking on the physicality in an obvious way.

I feel I was successful with this to a point as reflected in my journal:

Sunday 26th November

I'm now seeing how my methodology has slowly influenced them to leave out all the excess 'character' stuff and commit to the telling of the story. There was no 'character' clutter and yet most of the characters were well defined. I gave one actor an accent for the grandmother so it would help her break her speech pattern. It helped a bit. Every-one else is showing us their character through their actions – no physical trickery. I think it makes the telling of the story so much clearer.

At the same time I had several actors who were studying 'Method acting' here in Brisbane and they were unable to drop that work. Here are some of my reflections on the problem at hand:

Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> December

One actor needed a stern talking to. He was pretty slack in his preparation.<sup>24</sup> We talked a lot about the other training he's had in Method this year. And he agreed that he'd been using it more because he thought it was great for film and that's where he wants to go. My big problem with him is getting him to play the action of the scene – he doesn't exactly emote it but he stays true to the feelings and leaves it staying small and filmic – even though it's quite truthful. He seems to equate theatricality with non-truth and so we had to sort that out. I think I got him straight on what I need to see in this play. Once he was conscious of who was going to be in the audience he seemed to realise what he needed to do. He was very aware of what he didn't do for his NIDA audition and what Kevin<sup>25</sup> was trying to get out of him. I'm sure he'll come up to speed.

Another actor has surprised me. He is very stuck in the method stuff and seems more immovable than the other. It's true his work on camera this year was very good and he does have a great presence. But it all stays very naturalistic and he isn't bold with the language. He still paraphrases to keep it sounding 'real'. I don't know how much progress I really made with him. Tomorrow will tell.

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<sup>24</sup> This actor had been encouraged to only think of the moment in the work, not to employ any research. This meant that he had little connection to the whole story and everything he did was about him, not the character in the context of a bigger picture.

<sup>25</sup> This actor had auditioned for Kevin Jackson and me for the full-time course at NIDA. Kevin had made all the same comments to him that I had made.

It seemed that the Method actors were bringing a sense of truth to their work but it was so self-indulgent and lacked the theatricality needed to make the play live. My challenge was to use this emotional connection they had but to place it firmly in pursuit of action and to encourage them to use the text in a more theatrical way. I would describe this theatricality as relishing the language and using the language fully to achieve their action, rather than keeping the text in a small contemporary localised framework.

### **Focus Group and Assessors.**

My assessors were Aubrey Mellor, Director of NIDA and Michael Gow, Artistic Director of the Queensland Theatre Company. They were to assess me on my ability to elicit good performances from the cast.

After the second and final show I had a facilitator run a focus group in my absence, comprised of local actors, teachers, directors, writers and one theatre administrator. Whilst the comments of all were very useful I was particularly struck by one stream of discussion. I purposely put a 'Method' teacher in the focus group and a director/actor trained in a British drama school. As I was deliberately trying to move away from the tenets of the philosophies both of these practitioners adhered to, I was particularly interested to hear their feedback on the emotional content of the production. They both felt that I had succeeded admirably with the creation of a tight ensemble, especially considering the time restraints. They also felt I had created a very tight working relationship between the actors, in that their focus was driven in terms of telling the story. They both felt however, that the emotional life of the characters was lacking. They singled out the one actor with whom I had had the most difficulty as being the most successful. In the end I had given her a clear attitude to play because she was so wooden and had such a lifeless body. They liked that 'attitude'. She was not a 'Method' actor but they did note that one of my 'Method' actors was particularly strong. I find their comments very interesting and not without merit and in reflection I believe I could have created more connection in the character work if I had put more emphasis on the personalisation element of Practical Aesthetics.



However, their comments are in direct contrast to those of Aubrey Mellor:

Andrea's experience as an actor is in evidence through the sheer sanity of the acting, the lack of playing emotion (a fault so evident in school productions), the lack of dangerous hysteria/emoting when the drama could easily have followed their 'feelings', the lack of unnecessary complications regarding research or psychology, all these are evidence of an actors understanding benefiting the direction. It all argues well for Andrea's conversion case – and the argument that some (including myself and Robyn Nevin) believe a thorough knowledge of the actor's craft is necessary for a director.  
Mellor, A. assessment of Andrea Moor, Dec 2007

Of course this is a terrific compliment coming from such an accomplished director and teacher. However, more than that, it thrilled me that my whole philosophy on acting was seen so clearly.



I am left with this question:

If I had spent more time on the emotional preparation of the action would I have elicited the comments I did from the members of the focus group?

Another very interesting comment from the focus group was that they thought the scene between a Vampire and a Dog was one of the most successful because it was in a theatrical setting. This makes me think that perhaps I am better at the theatrical setting than at the naturalistic. Naturalism on stage still needs to be theatrical. Did I encourage the actors to find that theatricality or was the message they got from Practical Aesthetics too confined to realism? Did it make it impossible for them to make that leap?

When I collated a list of the positive and the more critical comments made by the focus group members, the lists were of the same length. The big positive from the focus group was that they all felt I had achieved a great sense of ensemble and that the connections between the actors were very successful. This is absolutely due to Practical Aesthetics. I'm glad they saw that connection. I was also glad that there were no comments criticising the 'putting on of character', as that was one thing I was consciously avoiding in my methodology. The ensemble work really came from the viewpoints. There were several comments about how they all had a surprising amount of stage presence and that there was little disparity of competence amongst the cast. I will take those comments as a huge compliment because there was a huge disparity of talent in the group. What they all did eventually have was a drive and a strong will to succeed on the night.

One comment worth analysing was that the production transcended the limitations of the cast. I believe this was done not only by the clever set design and very atmospheric lighting but also by the common goal of the actors to bring the story to light.

Apart from the criticism concerning lack of emotional depth many of the focus group members felt the play was just too ambitious. Others felt it was terrific to be so ambitious and I believe that the cast were given something to rise to rather than something that would come easily to them. Certainly much of the production criticism could have been solved with more time. Moments could have been explored more fully; the actors could have owned

the play as theirs; moments of calm could have been extended; the actors could have gotten over the shock of having an audience and embraced them more.

The criticism from the assessors was largely around the vocal work and the accents for act two:

The issue of accents is an interesting one, not clear in the playwright's intentions – unless just to make the reportage sections feel more authentically capturing the characters as interviewed during the plays creation. However, it is difficult to believe that all characters interviewed were young people hence such a device (requested by the playwright) did not add verisimilitude but merely drew attention to the fact that we were watching actors. It could be argued for an educational exercise, that actors having to also attempt accents is an extra extension; further, that young actors are happier being other people rather than being themselves. Though the production would have benefited by the director departing at times more freely and strategically from the playwrights questionable use of accents, the use of accents in the production made it a richer educational process for the young student actors. At times however, the lack of speech clarity, through the sometimes heavy accents, made moments of the play – and some key laugh lines – obscure. If clear communication is the prime aim of an actor, then many of the students often missed that criterion. I found myself continually distracted by it and questioning Churchill's intent; it struck me like watching Chekhov performed with Russian accents.

(Aubrey Mellor, 2006)

The only questionable choice was in using accents for the central, "vox pop" section. Churchill does call for this, to further the verbatim feel of this section, but it did put an extra strain on the actors in an already difficult, multi-layered and choreographed section. Another solution, probably in the way this section was staged, would have lifted it out of the everyday stories of the first and third sections but let the young actors stay in touch with the material, instead of being made self-conscious using some not very believable accents.

(Michael Gow, 2006)

On a more positive note both felt the production overcame these problems to some extent:

However, student speech generally suited the auditorium, with some being a little underpowered. But where lack of projection was evident, this was usually countered by sincerity in the performer and, remarkably, I did not hear a false note uttered in the entire performance. As with all young actors there was a noticeable lack of respect for line endings and driving thoughts through to the last word.

(Aubrey Mellor, 2006)



There were obvious limits to their skills, particularly vocal, but their engagement with the overall story and the emotional and intellectual truths of their characters was terrific.  
(Michael Gow, 2006)

### **Lessons learned**

In analysing all the comments of those mentioned in this paper I feel I can clearly locate what did work in this production and what I could improve on next time. I will try to identify the problems inherent in methodology.

### **What worked?**

I believe the strong connection to each other and the clear sense of purpose that each actor had is a direct result of employing the principles of Practical Aesthetics. Practical Aesthetics teaches the actors to be present in the moment, to pursue the action of the scene, to be willing to try any tactic necessary to achieve that action and to always work off the behaviour of the other actors in the scene. The clarity of the story being told was a result of clear analysis using this approach. The lack of gross characterisation was also clearly a result of employing sophisticated actions for each scene rather than resorting to tricks in physicality. The actors were clear on how they could get what their characters wanted in the scene rather than focusing on 'showing' us the character. The clear physicality was due to the employment of Viewpoints, as was the dynamics of a strong ensemble. The passion remarked upon by the assessors and focus group members was due to the implementation of Viewpoints, the thorough research and the commitment to telling the story respectfully. All these positives were achieved in the short time we had and so I have determined that the employment of Practical Aesthetics and Viewpoints can have a profound effect on a short rehearsal period.



### **What didn't work?**

The main criticisms are to do with voice and emotional connectedness. I take on the voice criticism wholeheartedly and would argue that strong vocal technique is a learned skill that is very difficult to embrace over a dozen or so lessons throughout the year. I did see immense changes in the vocal quality of many of the actors throughout the year and throughout the rehearsal. However I feel it's not just technique that was lacking but more an understanding of the theatrical demands of the piece. The most challenged vocally had a great fear of developing size in performance. And I take Aubrey Mellor's comment to heart when he says that the future of theatre must be "in finding ways that are not filmic but can only be of the live theatre". I think this reflects the actor's lack of exposure to theatrical events. How many of them have seen the great European directors? How many were willing to embrace a larger life in the story? I could possibly have helped this by showing them video footage of some of the great directors – Peter Brook, Ariane Manouchkine, Anne Bogart, Tadeusz Kantor or Jerzy Grotowski. I feel it was my responsibility to not just deal with the mechanics of the acting techniques and the world of the play but a bigger

picture of educating them to what the role of theatre is and how it can impact on an audience. I feel that most of them had this experience on stage, especially in the second public performance.

In regards to the accents, I accept that it did often affect the clarity of speech. I do however feel it is a specific theatrical device. Aubrey Mellor felt that it reminded us that we were watching actors when my intention was that we should now feel we are engaged with the real Romanians. I wonder whether my interpretation of the section created this misunderstanding. If I had the actors delivering each monologue directly to the audience with no interaction, would the accents have had the desired affect? This is how the play was performed by second year university students in a recent production I had seen and it was less engaging even if we did hear the stories with greater clarity. The solution may have been to not use accents and keep the physical movement of the act as I had. This would have allowed the audience to still become caught up in the events and yet hear the stories as well. However, this may have created confusion, as it may not have been clear that the characters in this section were not those of act one, the very reason why Churchill chose this convention.

The criticism from the focus group members regarding the lack of emotional content is interesting. I felt they criticised exactly what Aubrey Mellor commended and I would be inclined to think that the question of taste comes in here. I have had this discussion with Aubrey Mellor and have read him discussing the topic and I agree that there is often far too much focus on emotional preparation at the expense of clarity of story. I don't wish to reject the criticism out of hand however as I would have liked those who made the comments to have had a totally moving experience of the play, and so not felt the need to make that comment. Could I have addressed this issue better in my production? Yes I believe I could have. And I think the issue is in my lack of experience as a director. I believe I was too focused on product and not focused enough on process. I didn't trust that the story would be clear enough and as a result I was sometimes unable to allow the moments to be revealed in a measured way especially as I was pre-occupied with keeping the show as short as possible. I feel I could have gone into

more detail with the personalisation elements of Practical Aesthetics – the ‘as if’. There were times when I didn’t trust the technique – I was pushing for them to just do it! I was jumping to something theatrical and not laying the foundations of how to get there.

### **The next project**

This year I am directing the NIDA Young Actor’s Studio again with Strindberg’s *A Dream Play*. This is a very theatrical piece. I would employ a similar preparation for the actors i.e. research the playwright, understand the time he was writing in, look at his other plays, analyse the scenes to determine the action. How I then run the first rehearsal of each scene would be quite different. I think I would not get up on the floor quite so quickly and perhaps not work in a mock-up of the set so quickly. I think it would be beneficial to explore many options for staging early on and not set them for a while. I would also look at employing more powerful techniques of vocal action and vocal freedom. I think, budget willing, it would be good to have the voice teacher in on all rehearsals. I would like to see how we physicalise the text early on to get full boldness from the actors. I think Viewpoints could work well in terms of ensemble building and I would consider it as a way of finding the physical shape of the production.

I intend to ask the same focus group to comment on the next production as well, in order to determine if I have solved the problems some of them have put forward.

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## DCI Practice-led Project #2 – Project Brief

### TRACKING THE TRANSITION FROM ACTOR TO DIRECTOR IN PRACTICE-LED RESEARCH.

Location of Project:

Production – *Beautiful* by Jon Fosse

The Loft, QUT (Queensland Institute of Technology)

29 Nov – 8 Dec 2007

Project Mentors:

Academic Mentor: Dr. David Fenton

Professional Mentor: May-Brit Akerholt



Photo: Morgan Roberts. Featuring Jonathan Brand and Christopher Sommers. Set and costume design Kieran Swann, Lighting Jason Glenwright

This project represents my move from acting into directing. I trained as an actor, graduating from NIDA in 1985, and have worked extensively in Australia and overseas, predominately in theatre. I introduced the acting training technique, Practical Aesthetics, to Australia in 1994, and have continued to be a master teacher of that technique at NIDA for many years, at Practical Aesthetics Australia, which I co-founded in 1998 and at many other acting institutions including WAAPA. Although I have directed many student productions, this production is the first with a professional cast.

The project has two phases. The first is the direction Jon Fosse's play *Beautiful* and the second is a paper in which I examine the rehearsal and production process and analyse the research gathered from the production.

Umberto Eco's theories detailed in his text, *The Open Work* (1989) are deployed to help define Fosse's text. The theories of an 'open' work will be tested on the rehearsal and production period, giving me a valuable opportunity to measure my own impact on the work and how Eco's (1989) theories apply in practice. My approach to the rehearsal of the play will be tested against the traditional analytical tools of the Stanislavsky system (1980) and compared with the more recently developed tools of Practical Aesthetics (1986). These two approaches to acting have had the greatest influence on me as an actor and it is of great interest to me to see how they are utilized in the role of director. It is my intention to contrast my own reflection with that of other directors of Fosse's work.

My aim is to allow the production to come into being as a result of the guidelines the writer provides in the strict rhythm of the text and through the discoveries the actors make on the rehearsal room floor.

The aim of the project is to find the voice of the play without imposing directorial and design elements onto the play that may indeed muddy the meta-narrative of the play. The play poses a challenge, as much of it sits as an open work that has many layers of meaning and interpretation. As director my aim is to let that meaning be exposed through the exploration of the moments on stage without manipulating the meaning, thereby manipulating the audience response. To achieve this, I will examine my

‘directorial’ relationship with the actors, the translator/dramturg, and the creative team to see to what degree one needs to impose onto the work in order to give it a vital, clear and emotionally charged production. The idea of creating the production out of the moments explored in rehearsal rather than forcing directorial decisions onto the cast will be examined for the challenges and benefits this approach may provide. The need for analysis, character choices and pre-rehearsal decision-making by both myself as director and by the actors will also be examined. This examination aims to pinpoint moments of praxis where the theories of creative synergy are prevalent in the practice, or where they were found and lost or not achieved at all.

### **Professional Project Plan**

The phases of the project design:

The project will be in two parts.

#### **1. Directing *Beautiful* by Jon Fosse**

The production will be rehearsed from November 5 and will perform from November 29 to December 8, at The Loft, QUT. I will reflect on all parts of the pre-production, rehearsal and performance of the production, examining the relationships with cast, crew, creative team and translator. I will seek reflection from the participants in the project, feedback from peers through a focus group and audience response through post-show symposiums. The final production will be one of the examinable outcome.

#### **2. Paper: Reflection and research from the production.**

This paper will aim to tie together the reflection and research by examining four points of praxis. At the points where practice meets theory I will examine the success or lack of success in how this point of practice succeeded in achieving the desired creative outcome. These four points will be taken from the rehearsal process and may involve cast, the director, the creative team or the translator.



## **Examinable outcomes**

### 1. The production of the play      60%

This will be examined in and of itself. The assessors will determine if the production has succeeded in bringing to life the multiple meanings of the play in such a way as to make the audience reflect on their own lives. The assessor will determine if all elements of the production, including direction of the actors, design elements and shaping of the play have aided the director's vision.

### 2. The Paper:              40%

Length 7,000 words

The paper will attempt to examine the four moments of praxis set against a backdrop of the candidate's research and the outcomes of the reflection gathered from my own journal, those of the participants, the focus group comments, the assessors comments and the audience symposium.

## **TRACKING THE TRANSITION FROM ACTOR TO DIRECTOR IN PRACTICE-LED RESEARCH.**

This paper examines the outcomes of applying Umberto Eco's theory of 'the open work' to the direction of Jon Fosse's *Beautiful*. The paper will also address my transition from actor to director and how my experience as an actor has supported or hindered the skills needed as director. I will refer to the cast feedback, the focus group discussion and my own reflective journal to track the process and analyse the outcome of the project. In so doing I will dissect four points of praxis where the theory of the open work will be tested against the desired creative outcomes of the production. These four points will be taken from the rehearsal process and the production and will involve working methods with the actors, working on Fosse's text and the challenges facing the director.



Photo: Morgan Roberts. Featuring Ling-Hsueh Tang and Christopher Sommers. Set and costume design Kieran Swann, Lighting Jason Glenwright

The paper will firstly determine what an 'open' work is, addressing the four areas where 'openness' is explored in this production: the openness of the text; the openness of the actors; the openness of the director and the openness of the audience. The methodology will then be questioned within the practice and these points of praxis will be analysed so as to determine the success of the methodology within the practice. In summary I will determine the success or lack of success in applying this methodology to this production.

Jon Fosse is Europe's most highly produced contemporary playwright. *Beautiful* was written in Norwegian in 2002 and translated into English by May-Brit Akerholt in July 2003. This production of *Beautiful* was the Australian premiere and was performed at The Loft, QUT.

### **What is an Open work?**

In his book *The Open Work* (1989), Umberto Eco describes an open work as one that may have many different interpretations, both by those involved in creating or interpreting the work and by those viewing it. He claims that essentially all art is 'open' in that there will be many interpretations of the same form. However, it is in the making of the work that we can determine if it was created in an 'open' sense. An open work will appeal to the initiative of the individual performer, hence creating a work that's not finite.

The addressee is bound to enter into an interplay of stimulus and response which depends on his unique capacity for sensitive reception of the piece. In this sense the author presents a finished product with the intention that this particular composition should be appreciated and received in the same form as he devised it. As he reacts to the play of the stimuli and his own response to their patterning, the individual addressee is bound to supply his own existential credentials, the sense conditioning which is peculiarly his own, a defined culture, a set of tastes, personal inclinations and prejudices. Thus, his comprehension of the original artefact is always modified by his particular and individual perspective. In fact, the form of the work of art gains its aesthetic validity precisely in proportion to the number of different perspectives from which it can be viewed and understood.  
(Eco, 1989:3)

In light of this quote it can be seen that each work of art, though essentially 'open' is not necessarily an 'open work'. All works of art are responded to differently by each viewer, however, an 'open work' is one in which the work remains 'unfinished'. In dealing with a text there is finite material in that the words on the page are finite. However, the interpretation of those words may or may not lead to an 'open work', as many plays, though interpreted differently by different creative teams and by audiences may still have a completeness to them. In an 'open work' there is a sense of incompleteness:

In short we can say that every performance offers us a complete and satisfying version of the work, but at the same time makes it incomplete for us, because it cannot simultaneously give all the other artistic solutions which the work may admit.  
(Eco, 1989:15)

### **The openness of the text**

Is the play *Beautiful* by Jon Fosse an 'open' text? Matthias Hartmann, the celebrated German director behind the Bergen International Festival performance of Fosse's *Death Variations* states that "Fosse's texts are a musical score, and I am the conductor. Putting on his plays makes me feel I am developing artistically" (Hartmann, 2009). He adds "Fosse's drama is challenging. Even on a first reading many questions present themselves; it is open and full of pauses. But suddenly I see exactly how to do it, and if it works, it is as if no other interpretation or version exists." In this quote Hartmann is referring to the 'open' quality and elusiveness of the work. New York director Sarah Cameron Sunde, comments on the spaces that become revealed in Fosse's work and the indeterminable nature of it:

Whenever I correspond with him, I am reminded that life exists beyond the hustle-and-bustle of my New York lifestyle. Instead, it exists in specific moments of interaction between people and with nature—in a glance from a lover or a stranger on the street, in watching the sea for hours on end, or in the breath between actors and audience in a theatre. Fosse does not preach philosophy with his plays, but his work is so full of space for reflection that the result can seem spiritual or meditative, both for the artists working on the project and for the audience experiencing it. Fosse leads us to question: what happens in the space between people? An openness occurs which is as frightening as it is liberating. Everything is possible in this open-ness.  
(Sunde, 2007:57)

Fosse claims that even though the subject matter and character content of his work may seem closed, the experience for the audience is ultimately ‘open’:

For me it looks that if I write plays which are very narrow, are very closed – in their story, in their atmosphere, in their provinciality – I also paradoxically write plays that are very open, plays that are so basic that they can arrange for what moments when the closed dynamics in the play opens up – into tears, into laughter. For me the genuine drama is there, it is not in the action as such, it is in the enormous tension and intensity between people who are far away from each other and at the same time are deeply together, not only socially, but also in a shared understanding.  
(Fosse, 2002:192)

Fosse achieves this ‘openness’ on the page through the ‘poetic’ nature of the dialogue, the use of pause and repetition, the lack of punctuation, the de-personalising of the characters, and the ambiguous nature of the content. The result is a musicality in rhythm allowing the actors and therefore the audience to feel out the deeper meanings in the scene. The structure of the words on the page is sparse. There is no punctuation, just a capital for each line. Words are often used sparingly and each and every word matters, has weight. The shape of the lines on the page leaves a lot of room around the lines, not dissimilar to Pinter’s text, allowing for reflection within each moment. The characters are referred to in generic terms rather than being given names. The man, the other man, the woman, the mother are all archetypes and at the same time offer us a universal picture of that human experience. So rather than relating to the specific character we experience a more ‘open’ sense of human existence. As Sunde (2007:60) comments, “The ‘specific ambiguity’ of his voice allows us room to look at our own lives in order to find our own truths.”

All these elements add up to a kind of musical score that has some structure from the words on the page but the tempo, mood and pitch of the score is dependent on the interpretation both from the actors and the audience. The sense of space is a strong characteristic of Fosse’s writing, both the space between characters, between moments and also geographic space. In *Beautiful* this space is the Fjords themselves. Fosse is not

interested in exploring story as such but rather the pain and joy and difficulty of human interaction:

Fosse rarely provides us with answers on the surface, but if we engage in the spaces, the silences and the unknown, we enter the story with our own specific experiences and we are invested in our own version of the story. Fosse's "spaces" allow for deep cathartic moments. (Sunde, 2007:59)

Fosse began his writing career as a poet and obviously this has influenced his playwriting style and accounts for his delicate use of words and structure. He maintains that he is merely the vessel through which the 'writing voice' performs its magic (Fosse 1995). He claims that theatre allows for this writing voice to speak as much on the words as in the silences and within the images and the given circumstances. This language doesn't 'mean' but 'is'. It has its own solid form and as a result of that form it creates meaning. Fosse says that within this language that 'is' he understands more and more but the languages that 'means' alludes him more and more. The source of this writing, Fosse states, knows much more than he does and this 'knowing' cannot be spoken but must be written. This is reflected in the way the characters speak to each other in his plays. The dialogue is not 'sense-making' but has a knowledge or insight beyond meaning. It simply 'is'.

In good literature you always notice an unmistakable writing-voice. It cannot be reduced to content, or to form, but at least it is connected to the actual entity of form and content that is writing, that we call literature. For me, art became connected to just this voice, almost inhuman in its pitiable speech. And paradoxically, this is a voice which is there, and which doesn't say anything. It is a mute voice. A voice that speaks through silence. It's a question of a voice that in a way comes from what is not spoken; a voice that comes from a sign and lets itself be noticed through and in between what others are saying, for instance the narrative voice and the characters in a novel, or the characters in a play. (Fosse, 1994:1)

Eco sums up the effect of poetic writing in very similar terms by pointing out how space around the words and delayed expression of meaning allows the work to speak for itself:

The important thing is to prevent a single sense from imposing itself at the very outset of the receptive process. Blank space surrounding a word, typographical adjustments, and spatial composition in the

page, setting of the poetic text – all contribute to create a halo of indefiniteness and to make the text pregnant with the infinite suggestive possibilities.  
(Eco, 1989:9)

The passage below shows the way in which the text is structured. Only the first word of each line is capitalised with no punctuation within the line, not even a full stop to determine the end of the thought. The wife doesn't acknowledge the other man when she's introduced to him. What does the 'well' mean? Is it 'Well, (we've been interrupted) this is my wife'? Or is it, 'Well, (isn't it great she's arrived) this is my (gorgeous and successful) wife? We are given no clues from the play except that it's revealed later that the woman and the other man spent time together out on the boat the previous day. Did the man see them or is he oblivious to it? We are told earlier that it's many years since the two men have seen each other and later we are told of a frightening storm that they were caught in as children. We are forced to ask questions of each piece of information but the play never provides the answers for us. The different answers create different interpretations supporting the notion that this work is an open work.



Photo: Morgan Roberts. Featuring Ling-Hsueh Tang and Jonathan Brand. Set and costume design Kieran Swann, Lighting Jason Glenwright

THE WOMAN	Oh are you here <i>Short pause</i>
THE MAN	<i>to The Other Man</i> Well this is my wife <i>The Other Man nods, looks down</i>
THE WOMAN	<i>to The Man</i> I just thought I'd come down and have a look at the boat shed you've talked so much about And I find you sitting outside the shed Just like the old days <i>She laughs a little</i>
THE MAN	Yes it's <i>breaks off. The Other Man looks at The Woman, and looks down again</i> Well this is Leif my old friend from school <i>The Other Man gets up</i> We were together almost always
THE WOMAN	<i>To The Other Man</i> I've heard all about it <i>The Woman and The Other Man shake hands</i>
THE MAN	<i>to The Other Man</i> Well I've told her about you <i>Pause</i> You like it here
THE OTHER MAN	Well I live here



*The Woman walks along the shore, stands with her back towards The Man and The Other Man, looks out over the fjord, and the Other Man stands and looks down too. Long pause*

(Fosse, 2001, translated Akerholt 2004)

The layout of the text does create a rhythm and this also leads to meaning. The pattern of the text on the page is like a musical score and how one character finishes each phrase will determine how the next character is to begin theirs. The pauses are also a vital part of the ‘music’ of the scene. And so, like a piece of music each individual player will interpret the notes according to the way the music is affecting them at the time. They will have a response to what Eco calls an “aesthetic expression”(Eco, 1989:26).



Photo: Morgan Roberts. Featuring Jonathan Brand and Christopher Sommers. Set and costume design Kieran Swann, Lighting Jason Glenwright

## **The openness of the acting**

Having determined that the play is an ‘open’ work that Fosse makes clear is not driven by ‘action’, we are faced with a problem for the actors in that most of our training is in the pursuit of action. Traditional Stanislavsky training is all about the achieving of objectives and the action of the protagonist. This writing is very different. This text requires from the actors a willingness to experiment, a desire to explore the unknown in the scene. In this production each actor brought their own technique or lack of it to the rehearsal process and I worked around all these differing approaches. One actor was trained in Method and so he went for the emotional content of the scene, another had no formal training relying on making sense of each line with little ability to feel the moments as they unfolded. Another was constantly inventive and played against stereotype, bringing a very physical performance to the room, whilst another was slow and methodical and always needed to know where she was in the scene. The younger actors needed some real structure to their work and so I introduced them to Practical Aesthetics. This meant that they learnt how to work off each other very well but their inexperience still prevented them from taking independent creative leaps. They had to be ‘directed’ in everything.

Eco points out that the open work is to be interpreted by the individual artist in order to find expression. So it would stand to reason that each artist would interpret a scene differently based on their own lived experience, their training and their artistic ability. The main question is how do you define an artist? Each of the actors in this production had varied backgrounds and some were better equipped than others to have instinctual artistic responses. It was mentioned in the focus group that the play was “lyrical and required a full orchestra to play it. When one or more of the actors were out of tune the play couldn’t meet its mark” (Focus group 2007). I think this sums up exactly the dilemma I was in. It was a challenge for the cast to stay in the same orchestral movement, due to lack of training, experience and also due to the short rehearsal time we had. There were days in rehearsal and in performance where the actors found all sorts of wonderful twists and turns but given the short rehearsal and

performance period of the show it was inconceivable, in reflection, that I could have expected the cast to play as a full orchestra.

Not all responses to the production were so critical of the acting or of the style:

This simply-wrought work will challenge audiences to consider the complexities between characters, the relationship interplay between them, and the backdrops of existence, the landscapes of memory and actuality sculpted in rock, tide and flesh - how we are shaped by the forces around us, and in turn shape each other. This play is simply beautiful in its starkness, but its dark embrace draws us closer. (Boyce, 2007)

Ideally the 'open' work requires a cast of artists with finely tuned instruments, well versed in 'playing' with each other and capable of improvising the moment with the written text. Like a concert pianist the art of acting is a skill acquired through much training and a lot of practice. Shaun Tan in his paper on originality and creativity observes that though his picture books have been described as 'magical' or 'strikingly original' he is quite clear as to how he got there: there was no divine interference but simply a lot of hard work, keen observation and editing over many months (Tan, 2001).

### **The openness of the direction**

How do we address the director in line with Eco's philosophy on the 'open' work? The director's job is to set in stone the elements of the production, to determine the style, the pace and the interpretation of the piece. I came to this work with a lot of questions and I purposely left a lot of those questions unanswered. I was determined to let the piece reveal itself. The dilemma at every point was how much to set in stone? How prescriptive should I be? I wanted to stay responsive to what the actors were giving me but that wasn't always forthcoming. As with the discussion on the artistic qualities of the actors the same could be said for the director. My experience and training as a director are limited and my practice is still developing. I have directed many productions since *Beautiful* and I know that my style has developed a lot since then.



Photo: Morgan Roberts. Featuring Christopher Sommers. Set and costume design Kieran Swann, Lighting Jason Glenwright

An 'open' work is possibly one that a director comes to later in one's career after a great deal of experience, having learnt from mistakes and having acquired the confidence to sit in the risky place of the unknown. As an actor I have always responded most favourably to those directors who are less prescriptive, who trust that the actors will bring something unique to the process, enriching the text as a consequence. I have tried to be that kind of director. I gave free rein to the set designer, keen to see how the piece would speak to him. I felt his design captured the world beautifully. The elements that didn't work were my ideas: the use of the 'real' boat and having the actors step off the bottom of the rake. I was urged not to do both by the designer and he was right. I was also keen to let the lighting designer find his own response to the piece, resulting in an imaginative design that allowed the moving lights to act as a kind of performer within the production. Some members of the focus group criticised what they felt was an intrusive use of light, arguing that it took the audience out of the piece, while others applauded the sequence as it put the focus onto the audience, highlighting the universality of the subject matter. I thought it was most effective in drawing the audience into the mood of the piece and making them slightly uncomfortable at the same time. It was a 'beautiful' effect that, like the majesty of the fjords, created discomfort and anxiety in the audience.

My only instruction to the sound designer was that I wanted acoustic guitar. He came up with several different responses to the play and all served a purpose at different points. I felt he responded in a truly organic way and with just a few suggestions on timing and flow we arrived at the composition. The audio-visual designer offered an array of images that I had final choice of, leaving her responsible for the timings. The visual design was very successful due to the designer's clear understanding of the mood of the piece. It was important to not impose my ideas upon the designers, as I wanted their input to be a personal response to the writing. And as I pointed out I did interfere at one point and the result was disastrous.



Photo: Morgan Roberts. Featuring Ling-Hsueh Tang and Christopher Sommers. Set and costume design Kieran Swann, Lighting Jason Glenwright

## **The openness of the audience response**

It is impossible to determine how 'open' an audience may be when viewing a piece a theatre and the same can be said for the focus group members who came to the production bearing their own prejudices. Some came to support, some to educate, some to scoff, as with any audience. There were many varied opinions about the production, however the reviews were most complimentary. Alison Coates, a well respected and very experienced theatre reviewer seemed to really grasp what I was trying to achieve as reflected in these comments:

...the structure of the play is a mirror of Bach's The Art of Fugue, where themes arrive and then leave, are introduced and forgotten until they reappear, where pairings and motivations continually weave over and under each other like sunlight on water, and where the parts eventually make a perfect whole.  
(Coates, 2007)

She was impressed with the acting praising the actors for finding the perfect tone, performing the multi-layered text, allowing the nuance to come forth. This was particularly interesting considering the focus group were critical of the lack of uniformity in the style. Perhaps the focus group members felt compelled to experience the piece with a degree of criticality, in view of the impending discussion with colleagues. There were many conflicting opinions on most elements of the production, an appropriate reaction to an 'open' work with the work speaking to different audience members in many different ways.

I appreciated that there were no comments from the focus group accusing me of manipulating the audience's emotions in any way. The main criticism was that I left it too 'open', that it wasn't clear what I was trying to achieve with the production. I recall seeing a Sydney Theatre Company production of David Mamet's *Oleanna*, directed by Michael Gow and starring Cate Blanchett and Geoffrey Rush. I was deeply impressed with Michael Gow's direction in that he allowed the audience to determine which character they would sympathize with and when. I was interested in eliciting a similar response but as I was determined to allow the actors freedom of exploration, ultimately I feel I remained too 'open' in my direction.



## Points of Praxis

I will now examine four points of praxis: the development of the role as played by Actor 1; the challenges of the text; the working method of Actor 2 and the director's struggle to remain true to the work.

### 1. The development of the role as played by Actor 1

In Hungary, I've been told, they often say that when a night in the theatre was good, an angel went through the stage, one time, two times, many times. And for me this moment is the most important thing about the theatre, and a thing which no other art form has, this moment when an angel goes through the stage.

What happens in those moments?

Of course I don't know, no one does, because it just happens, or it does just not happen, one night it happens at that part of the play, the next night in another part.

(Fosse, 2002:191)



Photo: Morgan Roberts. Featuring Melissa Howard and Kevin Spink. Set and costume design Kieran Swann, Lighting Jason Glenwright

My first point of praxis is analysing the work of Actor 1. Actor 1 was lauded by most in the focus group as having found the style and they were certainly responsible for the moments when the angels went through the stage. However, Actor 1 had quite a difficult journey through the rehearsal



period. Actor 1's natural instinct is to be inventive and to find the energy and fun of the character. They are keen to 'mess' with rhythm and to 'play' with the other actors. All admirable qualities, but totally inappropriate for the character they were playing, and for the 'open' nature of the play. Actor 1 is instinctual and likes to follow whatever impulse is coming up for them, whilst this play required a clear structural approach in the acting, within which freedom would be found. I noted in my journal that the character was not "sophisticated or loud or effervescent or playful – but modest and country and contained and expressionless even though they speak a lot" (Moor, 2007). The character was all the things Actor 1 was not: stoic yet relaxed; manipulative to some point but measured.

I have great respect for Actor 1 and their work. This actor brings such focus to the rehearsal and I was very cautious not to dampen that enthusiasm. I let it go for a few rehearsals and encouraged them to explore moments to see what might come out of them. This wasn't the way in for Actor 1, and I needed to deal with character traits and images. I made this note in my reflections:

*I want to say a lot more to Actor 1 but I don't want to manipulate them or dampen their spirit – so I'll keep trying to gently guide them away from that and into something more suitable. Just when I think they understand me they do something that's a personal trait of the actor– they want to make the character more interesting than they really are. The character is a simple country character.*

*Actor 1 made a big breakthrough tonight – the scene was so chatty and nice on Saturday and I still couldn't find the real role of the character in the play – I think they are stoic, the person on the hill who's seen a lot and has suffered. They are simple and a bit stern – not the nice sweet relative who gives out chocolates and makes everyone comfortable – they are a bit imposing and quite controlling. Actor 1 finally dropped that cute old person stuff and made the character still – they say one thing and then take it back – one has to be wary around this character– they are tricky and possibly drove the son away. Once they come out to the garden he is trapped. They are a bit of an archetype.*

(Moor, 2007)

Actor 1 made these character adjustments and they worked well for them but also posed some other problems. All their responses were filtered through this notion of character and they ran off in one direction exploring the character when the real guts of the scene were right there in front of

them. I let them explore and then I asked them to do very little. To come out, to sit, to speak, to give very little energy to each moment and to not 'show' us the character at all. This was a struggle for them as they felt they weren't 'doing' anything, but it was wonderful. They started to allow moments to be explored and suddenly there was a rich subtext and the actual 'style' of the play was revealed. There was a strong tension, subtext, a deep internalisation and a wonderful presence. The still moments were rich, the silence was deafening and Actor 1 was deeply connected to those they were working with. Their work was now starting to reveal the nature of the writing. The journey that Actor 1 went on made it possible for them to remain 'open' to the work by not shutting down their responses. In the beginning Actor 1 was almost too 'open' in that they were wanting to play with the other actors but that play was all about invention, ignoring the signposts the writer gave us. Once those signposts were acknowledged and the right character image had been planted in Actor 1's mind they were then free to allow the scene to shift and move in whatever way it wanted to as a result of the dynamics of interplay within the scene. It was in these scenes that we came closest to achieving an 'open' style of playing.



Photo: Morgan Roberts. Featuring Jonathan Brand and Margi Brown-Ash. Set and costume design Kieran Swann, Lighting Jason Glenwright

## **2. The challenges of the text**

Fosse has said he's keen for his poetry not to appear as 'art-text'. The poetic style must have an unselfconscious expression. This is the way these people speak to each other, complete with long pauses and the repetition of ideas and phrases. Unlike a traditional plot based on action, in Fosse's plays there is tension in the character's inability to act and an obstacle to any action in the rituals that each character is forced to adhere to. The constant use of repetition and silence adds meaning through the rhythm. Fosse creates characters deep in existential crisis, not through argument or through psychological realism but through the sheer patterning of the language. In order for the existential dilemmas of each character to be expressed Fosse paints characters that are not fully individualised. They are a kind of stereotype and yet in that they are universal. Here is the power of his work. By creating these character frameworks the audience does not have to relate to the given circumstances of the particular character but to the living experience of the character and their interchanges within the play and so allowing for greater empathy.

Consequently, this dictated a certain approach with the acting style. As shown in the previous discussion regarding Actor 1's approach to the work, emphasis on character development was misleading as infinite possibilities presented themselves when we kept the scene very simple. The clues to the 'openness' of the work were hidden in the rhythm of the text. As noted earlier, Actor 1 chose to ignore the rhythm and this just muddled the journey for the character. Once they started to really observe the rhythm, the meaning of the text was revealed, as was the right dynamic of the scene. The correct observation of pause was also essential to the rhythm.

In the rehearsal process we discovered that the real meaning of each scene was revealed by simply allowing the text to present itself. The text was something unto itself. There were times when we needed to give the characters motivation and to even fill in a back-story, but this was only on occasion. The company had endless discussions about possible back - stories early on in rehearsals but we rarely set something in stone.

Translator and dramaturg, May-Brit Akerholt, kept saying – ‘yes, maybe and maybe not’ in response to the many back story scenarios we presented, which seemed a clear indication to us that we shouldn’t restrict the scenes by committing to a certain back story but rather allow the true nature of each scene to be revealed. The cast did criticise me in the post-production feedback about the lack of ‘set’ back-story. I’m not sure if we should have been more set in this or whether their reaction was to the challenge of ‘not knowing’ in those moments. I think Fosse has intentionally left things ambiguous as much for the actors as for the audience.

An example of this ambiguity is in the first scene between the woman, the man and the other man. The other man is an old friend of the man’s and the woman who is married to the man has supposedly never met the other man. Too much subtext clouded the possibilities in the scene. The woman and the other man have been together before but the audience doesn’t know that and so there should be nothing to make them suspect it. Here are some notes from my rehearsal journal that discusses the dilemma of subtext:

*I was at a loss with this scene for a while – it seemed too consciously deep and meaningful – then we stripped all the subtext out – this was simply the first meeting of the woman and the other man and it was innocent. She simply wanted to know what happened when they went out too far – she teased him a little and the man was joking about how they had to walk home – innocent – and it worked beautifully – it left the other man with a sense of having been exposed to very real human interaction – real social intercourse and he was reeling from the experience.*

*My discovery so far with these scenes is that there is always something to be revealed in each scene that I have no idea about – I’m not blocking anything or making any decisions about how the scene should look until I see what the actors bring to the floor. It’s usually as a result of what doesn’t work that I find what does work. All I can say is that I’m trusting my instincts here – I have alarm bells that go off when it gets too deep and meaningful and when it gets too solemn or when nothing seems to be going on.*

(Moor, 2007)

Remaining open to the unraveling of the meaning was a challenge to me in my role as director, especially as my reliance on the acting technique Practical Aesthetics has created in me a need to always define and resolve the story. Practical Aesthetics is based on the Aristotlean premise of

character and action. This play sits outside of that. The true challenge was how do we allow the text to breathe without becoming self indulgent or boring? It wasn't until May-Brit rejoined us at the end of the rehearsal period and referred closely to the text that I became aware as to just how much we had deviated from the rhythm of the speech. Once the actors recommitted to the spacing and pauses we again found new meaning. This also presented a problem so late in the rehearsal period in that the first preview became very stilted and too measured. The actors were pedantic with the text and it felt laboured and boring. The next night was unfortunately opening night and not enough time had been given to the actors to let the text sit comfortably. A few nights later they were really starting to sit in it with ease and finally some humour!

### **3. The working method of Actor 2**

As director I was presented with a real challenge in working with Actor 2 (Actor 2). Actor 2 has not had any formal training as an actor. They had graduated from university with a teaching degree and consequently had very little in the way of technique to bring to rehearsal and no actual process. They had no vocal technique, little spatial awareness and lacked the actor's curiosity to investigate and question. It was fairly clear that they just wanted to get it on the floor. As they were giving a lot of time to rehearsal for no payment I didn't feel comfortable challenging them out of their comfort zone. Besides, there didn't seem to be a desire to be challenged. It was clear that my challenge was to try to get the performance I needed from them without appearing to be trying to teach them in any way. I had long been an admirer of the work of Actor 2, but I wasn't aware of their limitations.

As already discussed, the open nature of the work can only be pulled off if each actor is working as an instrument in an orchestra. If one instrument is out of tune the music will fall flat. Each instrument must be well tuned and its players very well versed in the playing of it.



Photo: Morgan Roberts. Featuring Melissa Howard and Kevin Spink. Set and costume design Kieran Swann, Lighting Jason Glenwright

Fosse is clear that he is not interested in writing text that 'means' something but rather allowing meaning to be 'revealed' in the moment. Actor 2 was only concerned with finding the meaning of each line. They tried to colloquialise the speech by putting in 'ums' and 'ahs', by lifting the intonation at the end of the line as a Queenslander would do in everyday speech, by not giving the words the full weight, by not carrying the thought through to the end of each line and by ignoring the spacing of the line on the page. I had to give them as little reason to 'make sense' of the speech as possible. I tried dropping all back story and encouraging them to just speak the text and see what came out between them and the other characters. But they found it difficult to really enter the world of the play. They stayed connected to 'playing' with their fellow actors with a sense of mockery regarding the tone of the play.

Once Actor 2 started to let themselves 'feel out' the reason for saying the next line they really started to shine. They stopped pre-meditating the line and allowed themselves to have that slightly frightening moment of not quite knowing where the scene was going. They abandoned their need for meaning and as a consequence the true meaning of the moment was revealed. It was a challenge for Actor 2 to stay in that place. I think they felt too naked to stay there in front of an audience. And the result was that they had to hide behind some kind of attitude in order to feel comfortable. I then gave very specific directions to try to keep them as open to response as possible. The effect was that they seemed uncomfortable and unsure as a performer. As we stripped away all the indication, emotion and attitude there was really nothing left and the scenes became boring.

I feel I failed in getting Actor 2 to where I would have liked them to be. They proved that they could achieve a wonderful simplicity and were able to abandon the need to 'make sense', but I could have started the rehearsal process with a clearer instruction for how we would proceed.

#### **4. The director's struggle to remain true to the work.**

When examining the responses from the focus group and the cast it's apparent that my main issue as director was when to allow the work to 'reveal itself' and when to 'shape' the production. I recall being terrified before the preview as I felt I hadn't 'shaped' the production enough. I was doubting the idea of the 'open' work and wishing I had been more decisive. I think the real issue was the terror of the unknown. Just as the actors needed to trust the space between them, I needed to trust Fosse's writing. I was determined to sit to the side of the rehearsal space, not imposing my ideas too much on the production, encouraging the actors to explore the moments and allowing the play to reveal itself. I do believe I did that to some degree. How successful that was I'm not so sure.

German director Matthias Hartmann acknowledges how difficult Fosse's work is and how suddenly it will reveal itself to the director (Hartmann, 2009). I had this experience towards the end of the rehearsal period and made these notes in my journal:

*I sat there tonight thinking this is so boring – the audience is going to hate this – they'll be thinking what the hell is this – what does it mean – what a wank! And then act 2 3 & 4 just took me away and it was all clear – this play is about Beauty and how it affects us. The bright side and the shadow of beauty. How the landscape affects us, how the woman and the girl affect the men. And the observer of it all – the mother. The play isn't 'about' anything as such – it is an exposé or an experience of beauty and its shadow.*  
(Moor 2007)

The focus group felt that there were times when I really achieved the appropriate 'style' at which moment the actors were true to the structure of the text, were working off each other, were bold in allowing the pauses to be filled with whatever the dynamic was between them and allowed themselves to be moved by the mood of those moments. And so the 'style' was not something that was imposed onto the production but was revealed when the indicators in the script were adhered to. This had the effect of a deep internalisation of the characters, drawing the audience into the psychological effect of space around and between the characters. The focus group picked out Actor 1 as being the best example of this style, yet I wasn't



directing Actor 1 for style but for truth. They struggled with my approach until they really simplified the work and gave over to the layout of the text.

The moments where the style seemed at odds were when the actors were not true to the rhythms of the text, were not listening to each other, were 'inventing' things in the moment rather than going with whatever the dynamic was between them. These moments seemed to lack any substance and we became very aware of actors on a stage, rather than being transported by Fosse's writing. It was my intention for all those elements to be played very lightly on the surface, the modulation of the actor's voice, the held quality of the movement, the gentle shifts in lighting and audio visuals allowing for the audience to be mesmerised. This was certainly achieved in moments as pointed out by the focus group but when it was not there they felt they sat at the edge of the experience rather than within it. I was always asking myself 'should' I be more prescriptive about 'style'? But I think that would have been a naïve approach. I believe that if I had had more time the 'style' would have been revealed to us in greater clarity.

I felt conflicted in my direction when it became apparent that I would need to be quite prescriptive with the two younger actors and Actor 2. I would talk to them about the scene, the importance of observing the textual structure, the mood etc. but still they wouldn't 'get it'. I found myself giving Actor 2 line readings, which is very much against my idea of good directing, but I was stuck as they didn't seem to be able to interpret. The others would go away and think about a note and then try something new out on the floor the next day whilst Actor 2 was not trained in working in this manner.

On reflection I think I did come to the play underprepared. Although I was very familiar with his other work, I think I needed to research Jon Fosse much more. Reading his work and commentary on his work was of little use until I had actually experienced first hand the living experience of his words in the space. Important lessons were learned not just about directing this style of work but almost more importantly about the rights and expectations of a director in that position of leadership. I was still learning

to stand up in defence of my choices born from a thorough understanding of the play, the issues and the style of the writer. With every project I've done I feel I've 'winged' it to some degree. I feel I've been very lucky that it's all come together but often that's been serendipity and not planning. My observation of actors is strong and I believe I could have gotten better performances out of the actors. I think I let myself down with the young ones in *Beautiful* – I could've done a better job. I think I was stuck with Actor 2 but I could have done a better job with Actor 3. Actor 1 I worked hard on and it paid off.

I need to trust myself a lot more. This was reflected in comments from the cast:

*At certain times, I felt that Andrea could have been a bit more proactive in leading the actors. This was a very challenging piece and in the early part of the process, it was wonderful to have a director who was so open to different interpretations and comments and did not impose a preconceived vision from the outset. However, in the mid-stages of getting up on the floor, I sometimes felt that I would try things and Andrea would be very good at identifying a moment that worked well or one that didn't, but did not then contextualise her comments in terms of what she felt those moments revealed about the character or the direction of the work as a whole. This, in some ways left the actor a little unresolved about what exactly they had found and how they could build on that, or what direction to take next. In a few instances where Andrea gave me a clear direction to try very specifically in a scene, key things were often revealed because it took me in a direction I could not conceive of by myself. It served to highlight to me that, when she takes the lead, Andrea has a level of insight that is highly constructive to the work. I think she should just feel more confident that she is allowed to take that lead and that it in no way undermines her obvious respect for each actor's input.*  
(Actor 3, 2007)

The overall feedback from the cast was very positive as they all felt they were respected as actors, given the freedom to explore, challenged at the appropriate times and all within a very safe environment. But some did feel that we needed to be clearer on back-story and that my ability was strong but that I wasn't using it at times. This was very much because I was determined to keep this work 'open', however I now believe that within structure there is freedom and I needed more structure in my approach.

Having said that, if I were to direct this play again or another Fosse play I would let the actors be clear on the back story but not necessarily have that back story shared with the other actors. I think Fosse's work is deliberately ambiguous and is about the felt experience and so ultimately it has to be approached with a sense of 'openness'.



Photo: Morgan Roberts. Featuring Margi Brown-Ash. Set and costume design Kieran Swann, Lighting Jason Glenwright

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion I feel I had some success in my transition from actor to director. The cast feedback expressed gratitude at me being so respectful of the actor's process. The actors also felt I allowed them room to move and discover without dictating how they should approach a scene. They did feel that I could have been more assertive and made more decisions relating to back-story as well as giving more specific acting notes. My observation there is that I may be too careful with actors still, shying away from real challenge. I believe I can do both.

This was an ambitious project to apply a theory to and I think I left the work far too 'open' – I needed to make more decisions about style, about what had preceded each moment, about the use of the set. I should've really thought out the possibilities of the blocking of the piece before we started rehearsals rather than leaving it all up to what was discovered in rehearsal. I do believe I treated the actors as I would like to be treated myself when acting, however I could have taken the reins at times and been more decisive about achieving my desired outcome.

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Photo: Morgan Roberts. Featuring Ling-Hsueh Tang, Melissa Howard, Margi Brown-Ash and Christopher Sommers. Set and costume design Kieran Swann, Lighting Jason Glenwright